

PERRY RHODAN



THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPACE FICTION SERIES



WORLD WITHOUT MERCY

William Voltz

#139

Perry Rhodan

No. 139

World Without Mercy

*A discharge of powerful energies hurls them into the void –
and onto the world without mercy . . .*

William Voltz

It is the year 2113 by earthly reckoning. For Terrans, not quite 150 years have passed since the successful moon landing of a chemical rocket – the prelude to true space travel.

In cosmic terms, this was an incredibly short span of time. Nonetheless, under Perry Rhodan's leadership the Solar Imperium has managed to become one of the main pillars of galactic power. Of course the men of Sol had important assistance to aid their task – if we only consider the Arkonide Khrest, the energy being on Wanderer, Atlan, Harno, the Swoons, and Pucky the mousebeaver! – yet this task could never have been accomplished without the selfless, self-sacrificing help of all who carried in their hearts a longing for the stars.

The intercosmic void between the galaxies has brought a new threat which now confronts all responsible leaders with an almost insurmountable problem: how to combat an aggressor whose spaceships are almost indestructible?

The first clues to this burning problem have already been discovered by the robotics experts, and even the Posbis' "Blitzkrieg Galactica" has been halted by a ruse at the last moment when the central worlds of Arkon were threatened by a wave of destruction.

*But now as ever before the danger threatening all galactic peoples is very great, and the situation even gets worse – on the **WORLD WITHOUT MERCY . . .***

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

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THE CENTRAL FIGURES OF THE NOVEL –

Perry Rhodan – A wrong connection becomes the right one for the First Administrator.

Atlan – Arkon's Imperator has a taste for danger.

Fyrn – A spy who didn't know he was one.

Van Moders – The robotics expert believes in fairytales.

Reginald Bell – Perry's closest friend and 2nd-in-command.

Pucky and Ras Tschubai – The teleporters jump into the “frying pan”.

Ivan Goratschin – The two-headed mutant becomes a strategic weapon.

John Marshall and Wuriu Sengu – The other mutants on the mission.

Keechie – A four-eyed Nevranian.

Allan D. Mercant – Chief of Solar Intelligence.

Maj. Lee Endicott – Cmdr of light cruiser *MONTANA*.

Berhaan – Akon transmitter expert.

Maj. Benito Bassaldari – Cmdr of fleet tender *BA-F333*.

1.

THE UNDERCOVER MAN

Within six hours a transmitter mishap was to catapult Perry Rhodan into a hellish world – but he didn't know this as he stepped into a small coffee shop and encountered the spy.

Nor did he know that Fyrn was a secret agent of a group of political fanatics of the Blue System. Even Fyrn was not aware of his actual assignment because his employers had meanwhile discovered how dangerous the Terran mutants could be. Fyrn's conscious mind had been carefully processed so that the Akon considered himself to be one of the transmitter technicians who had just completed constructing the large matter transmitter on Arkon III.

On the other hand, Fyrn's subconscious mind was constantly under tension. It carefully registered every event and keenly observed everything that was happening around him.

When Perry Rhodan entered the shop, Fyrn's subconsciousness generated a warning signal. Here was the most important man in the entire operation. Fyrn shoved his cup aside, which was still full of steaming hot coffee. Out of the corner of an eye he caught the immaculate glitter of the robot waiter who was approaching to see if he wanted a refill. Other than Fyrn, the only customers present were two welder foremen from the construction group. Rhodan had come to a halt as he entered but was now moving toward the counter. He was wearing a plain uniform that gave him a youthful appearance.

"May I invite you to sit at my table, sir?" asked Fyrn before Rhodan reached the counter.

The Administrator turned around and looked at him. The brilliant clarity of his eyes was disconcerting to Fyrn. He stood up with a smile and pulled back his chair.

The tall, slender Terran nodded. He came and sat down opposite him. "You're one of the Akon technicians," he commented.

The robot rolled up to them soundlessly and Fyrn waited until Rhodan had ordered his coffee. He heard one of the two welders laughing loudly about something. When he reached for his cup he was surprised to note that his

hand was trembling. He sought to find a reason for his sense of insecurity but failed.

He spoke swiftly to conceal his uneasiness. "I work in Berhaan's group," he said. "We're starting to hook up the final connections."

The robot brought Rhodan's coffee. The Administrator held the cup in both hands as though he wanted to warm them.

"You've done a good job," he answered amiably.

Fyrn observed himself inwardly in an attempt to find a reason for his increasing uneasiness. Was it that this meeting was unusual, to say the least? But ever since the galactic alliance had been established by the treaty of September 10, 2113, no one took much notice of Akons and Terrans sitting together like this. The Arkonide and Solar Imperiums had formed a military-economic union with the empire of the Akons. The latter had offered every possible assistance while Rhodan had given them all available data that had thus far been gleaned concerning the Posbis.

The Akons had only yielded to Rhodan's urging for a coalition when they felt threatened by the bio-robots. By means of a clever ruse, Rhodan had used the Akons' military weakness to draw them into his plans. Terran vessels disguised as fragment ships had flown mock attacks against the Akon planets until the Supreme Council had called for help. The price of military assistance had been their signing of the treaty. But not all Akons had been in agreement with this alliance. Underground movements, such as the organization Fyrn belonged to, were trying to sabotage the resulting friendly relationship.

However, agent Fyrn knew nothing of the existence of such groups. He was convinced that he was one of the technicians that the Supreme Council had assigned to Arkon III for the purpose of building the large-scale transmitter.

Rhodan's voice penetrated the Akon's thoughts. "You seem to be tired," he said.

Fyrn was startled. He hastily drained his coffee cup. Under the gaze of this dangerous man he felt that the other's eyes could see through him effortlessly. "The fleet tender has already taken off, sir," he remarked, in order to break the silence.

The robot glided up next to him and refilled his cup. The vapors rising from the hot liquid seemed to form strange shapes. Rhodan watched the two welding foremen as they got up and put on their safety helmets and walked out of the shop. Fyrn was sorry to see them go because for some reason

their presence had been reassuring. Now he was alone with this man.

Rhodan smiled musingly. "When one considers the original purpose of a tender, it's hard to imagine that this ship is now transporting a major-sized transmitter into space."

The fleet tenders were used for towing or transporting damaged spaceships. They consisted of a flat, rectangular platform with a dome-shaped superstructure at the bow. Inside the dome were the navigation central and the crew quarters. The propulsion units were housed inside the long landing platform, which on the larger tenders measured 300 by 800 meter. Without exception the modern tenders were equipped with linear drive engines.

"The collaboration of our two civilizations has created an amazing technical symbiosis," Fyrn remarked with a faint attempt at humor . . ." They brought a tender and a major transmitter together."

Behind the counter the music box was playing a new tape which blended electronic sounds quite pleasantly with old-style musical instruments. Rhodan felt sleepy although he had rested a lot in the past few days. The Akon was not uncongenial, yet he sensed the man's hidden agitation. He wondered what the cause of it might be.

The preparations of the past few weeks had been in support of an operation that was aimed at solving the final mystery of the Posbis. Using their high-precision computers, Akon scientists had calculated that more light could probably be shed on the origin and strange behavior of the Posbis if it were possible to investigate a Posbi space station under proper conditions with good scientific instruments. Previously only small commando parties had been able to penetrate such spherical stations for just a few hours, which was not long enough to gather sufficient information. While the construction of the transmitters had been proceeding on Arkon III, the allied fleets had been on combat alert on the edge of the milky way, waiting for the possible appearance of fragment ships.

The Supreme Council of the Blue System had presented a plan to Rhodan which was designed to provide valuable information concerning the Posbis. Fleet tender *BA-F333* had been equipped with a large transmitter receiver. In addition, Akon scientists had installed special projectors on the tender's platform. These projectors generated the same blue energy screen which the Terrans had encountered during their first thrust into the Blue System on board the *Fantasy*. The energy structure of the screen was of a six-dimensional order – which meant that it could not be penetrated by any known weapon. The only thing that could get through it was a ship surrounded by a Kalup absorption field.

The plan provided for stationing tender *BA-F333* within about 2 light years of a Posbi station. Personnel, materials and scientific research equipment were to be sent to the tender by means of the large transmitter on Arkon III, whose energy arc-gate was over 300 feet high. The platform was to be an advance-post station for future missions. The Akons had provided devices with which it was hoped that the Posbis' relativity fields could be destroyed.

Rhodan looked at his watch. Just a half hour ago the tender had taken off with a small crew. Its destination was a Posbi station that was located some 50000 light years away in the intercosmic abyss. As soon as the platform vessel arrived, the crew was to transmit a pulse-burst signal, at which time Rhodan and his group were to enter the transmitter.

Fyrn nervously cleared his throat, disquieted by his companion's silence. Whatever had possessed him to invite this powerful man to his table? Fyrn was sure that something was wrong. A sense of disaster rose in him like a sudden illness.

Rhodan emptied his cup. "I have to get back to work," he said. "Thanks for the coffee."

Just as he got up from the table, three men came in whom Rhodan recognized as Berhaan, Sos of Laar, and Rowyn.

"One moment, sir!" There was an unusual coldness in his tone as Berhaan spoke. "Sir, we have to arrest this man."

It took several seconds for Fyrn to realize that Berhaan was referring to him. He shoved his chair back so suddenly that his cup spilled golden-brown coffee all over the table.

"What is he charged with?" asked Rhodan.

The robot waiter appeared and cleaned the coffee from the table, completely indifferent to the situation.

Berhaan explained. "He's a spy from the underground organization that is trying to sabotage the galactic alliance. The criminals have infiltrated him among the technicians so that he can obtain information about our plans."

Fyrn supported himself with both hands against the edge of the table, frantically looking back and forth between Berhaan and the Terran. "But-but that's crazy!" he stammered.

Berhaan moved toward him impatiently but a gesture from Rhodan stopped him.

"Wait a moment, Akon," he said. "I'll have my mutants check him out."

Sos of Laar laughed scornfully. "That would be of no use, sir. The underground people take no chances of having their spies betray themselves. It's an absolute certainty that Fyrn knows nothing about his assignment. He's convinced that he's one of the technicians. The actual spy work is performed by his subconscious mind. Later, when he returns, all valuable information can be brought to the surface of his consciousness easily."

Rhodan pondered this for a moment. "If it's all that simple," he said, "then we ourselves shouldn't have much difficulty in penetrating his subconscious."

"If we try that," Berhaan explained, "it will kill him. He has a mental security block that can only be removed by those who placed it there. Any wrong manipulation would destroy his brain."

Rhodan considered this. Naturally a secret organization had to take precautions, but this method seemed to be a bit barbaric. "So what do you plan to do with Fyrn?" he asked.

Berhaan's eyes glittered, reflecting an unshakeable faith in his own intelligence. The legendary self-confidence of the Akons was especially marked in him. "That," he declared, "is a matter which only concerns us and the Supreme Council."

Rhodan felt the warmth of the hot coffee working into his system. It was something like the unaccountable attachment he had begun to have for Fyrn. He was certain that the Akons would attempt the very thing that they refused to let the Terrans try. They would attempt to remove Fyrn's mental security block without killing him. But it was more than probable that they would not succeed, and thus Fyrn would die. The brain of this man, with whom he had been sharing a friendly cup of coffee, would explode. It would be purely mental, but the effect would be the same as for any other kind of explosion inside a human skull. The end result would be death.

"I am asking you to please turn this man over to Solar Intelligence," he said to Berhaan.

The Akon's normally expressive face was like a mask. "I presume that your request is of an urgent nature?" There was a faint note of sarcasm in the question.

Rhodan was moved to laugh at this. "Urgent enough to demand that we succeed," he answered.

Rowyn had remained silent until now. "In the long run," he said, "your request could endanger the alliance, sir. It might cause complications."

Rhodan decided to be brutally frank. “The only thing that could endanger our alliance at the moment would be the elimination of the Posbi threat,” he said. Berhaan’s face reddened but he said nothing. Rhodan grasped Fyrn by the arm. “Come with me,” he ordered.

He guided the Akon past the silent scientists and out of the coffee shop. He was grateful for the fresh air outside. He released his grip on Fyrn and looked ahead toward the building site where the transmitter loomed like an arch of triumph.

“You probably saved my life,” said Fyrn quietly.

Rhodan observed him with a side glance. Fyrn’s face was youthful, making him seem much younger than he actually was. He had a straight and narrow nose, and in contrast to most Akons his eyes were gray – as was his hair, but the latter was a youthful and gleaming gray. He was slender in build, almost to the point of fragility.

“Are you a spy?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” was the other’s reply.

They continued onward toward the transmitter. They were soon overtaken by Berhaan and his companions, who drove past them in a construction work car. From the driver’s seat, Berhaan smiled at them as if nothing had happened. The Panotol episode had proved him to be a competent scientist. He was an unusual man.

After the car had passed, Fyrn spoke again. “What are you going to do with me?”

“I’m going to take you along with us,” Rhodan answered.

Fyrn came to a sudden halt. “But if I’m a spy which I very probably am you’re liable to have trouble with me.”

“The Posbis will leave you little opportunity for any espionage activity whether consciously or unconsciously.”

Fyrn was forced to smile. They met four Terrans who were on their way to the coffee shop. These men would not be going through the transmitter. Including Fyrn, however, the number of personnel for the mission was now 43. Among them were Atlan, Van Moders, Pucky, Tschubai, Marshall, Goratschin and other mutants. In addition there were a number of specialists in the highly-selected team.

The timespan which now separated the group from the inferno had now been lessened by another hour. In just 4 hours and 33 minutes, they would enter the transmitter.

2.

THE DOOR TO NOWHERE

For officers of the Solar Fleet, to be assigned to a fleet tender represented a kind of demotion. Tenders took no part in military operations, being only responsible for retrieving battle-damaged derelicts. Warship commanders referred to tender crews in a derogatory tone. Unjustifiably they were called the “Junk Patrol,” but such men were nevertheless aware of the dignity of their profession. Each man was a specialist in salvage operations and could pilot a spaceship. The fact of the matter was that tender crew members had more technical knowledge than any battleship commander.

Benito Bassaldari, commander of tender *BA-F333*, would not have traded places with the chief officer of a warship under any circumstances. The little dark-haired major from Italy had received a special assignment that had set him and his ship apart from the “Junk Patrol.” He concentrated on navigating the huge platform and its transmitter receiver toward his distant goal between the island universes. Rhodan had briefed him quite thoroughly concerning the details of their mission.

All spacemen considered the awful immensities between the galaxies to be an absolute void, which they referred to as the abyss, but for Bassaldari this flight was not simply an adventure. The major was quite aware of the importance of his assignment. On its fulfillment hung the success or failure of an attempt by Terran specialists to investigate a Posbi space station. However, when fleet tender *BA-F333* emerged from semi-space within two light years of the target station and the special Akon projectors began to build up a bluish defense screen around him, Bassaldari felt the full impact of his responsibility.

On one of the viewscreens in the control central he could observe the tender’s long platform on which the transmitter receiver had been constructed. Any men leaving the receiver station would be exposed to the vacuum of the void, so upon their arrival Rhodan and his companions would be wearing spacesuits. At the end of the platform there was a medium-sized airlock that would provide them with access into the interior of the tender.

Bassaldari stabilized his flight pattern so that the ship established an orbit around the distant Posbi station. The feeling of absolute solitude that had

come upon him in the past few hours was not diminished by the presence of the Posbis. On the viewscreens the long belt of the Milky Way was at once a magnificent and depressing spectacle. It only served to magnify one's awareness of his own insignificance.

The tender's sensitive tracking and scanning equipment gave an exact indication of the enemy station. Bassaldari would not have believed that the light of the galaxy could be effective so deep within the Abyss. Although solid objects were still invisible to the unaided eye, nevertheless with the aid of instruments they could be seen to give off a faint reflection. Only now could the major fully appreciate the tremendous technical capacity of the Posbis who had established an entire ring of stations around the galaxy. Of course even for them it had been impossible to build such a tight observation ring that no ship could penetrate it without being detected.

If the Posbis feared an enemy so much that they would set up countless stations like this, then that enemy must be at least their equal in strength. There was no doubt in Bassaldari's mind that this enemy was the Laurins. Whoever could give the Posbis cause for alarm would sooner or later menace the Solar Imperium and the whole galactic alliance. All of humanity could only hope that the Posbis and Laurins would be too occupied with their own altercations to have time to thrust more deeply into the galaxy. Nevertheless, nothing should be left untried that might serve to glean more knowledge of these two forces. For Bassaldari his assignment here in the immensity of the abyss took on an even greater significance.

He gave the order to transmit the planned pulse-burst signal to Arkon III. It would be the trigger to bring the commando team into action.

Capt. Essex, his first officer, turned to him. "How long will it be, sir, before the chief comes through the transmitter?" Because of his experience in Terra's private industries, Essex might have carved out a fantastic career for himself as an engineer, but he preferred to climb about in the debris of wrecked spaceships and use his skills to bring them safely to the platform.

Bassaldari checked his watch. It wouldn't be long now before the first man stepped out of the transmitter. Secretly he looked forward eagerly to this moment, because for the first time he would be in direct contact with Perry Rhodan and his mutants. And in addition there was Atlan, Imperator of the Greater Imperium of Arkon, who would also be taking part in the operation.

"It's just about that time, Captain," he finally answered.

But when a half hour had passed he began to be uneasy. The platform was

still empty of visitors. Capt. Essex was nervously pacing then control central.

“Something must have gone wrong, sir,” suggested the latter anxiously.

When Bassaldari glanced at the cold magnificence of the galaxy on the viewscreen, he wondered if it wasn't presumptuous of humans to attempt to bridge such vastness. However, he suppressed such thoughts and tried to be objective. Certainly it would not be long now before Rhodan would personally come through the airlock and explain the reason for the delay.

But now he was checking his watch at regular intervals. His small crew waited with increasing anxiety as they watched for the first men to step through the energy arc of the transmitter.

They waited a full hour after they had sent the pulse signal. But no one came.

*

It had required six weeks for the Akon and Terran scientists to finally agree on the inventory of equipment that Rhodan and his men should take with them.

When Perry Rhodan looked at the huge pile of stacked equipment that had been assembled he could not suppress a smile. Evidently it represented a hard compromise between considerations of expense and the actual requirements of the commando team. Well, during the transfer it would be no load for the big transmitter. Later, on board the tender, there would be sufficient opportunity to bypass most of the items and pick out only what was practical, without getting involved in endless discussions with scientists.

Rhodan had already gotten into the spacesuit with its high performance air-conditioning and power units. It was not a flying suit but that was not required for this mission. All it was needed for was to traverse the tender's deck from the transmitter receiver to the airlock.

A few minutes ago their hypercom had picked up the signal impulse from the *BA-F333*. Bassaldari had established himself at the pre-determined distance from the enemy station. Rhodan checked his wrist transceiver for the last time. The Akon, Fyrn, was remaining close to his side as if he feared that Berhaan would make a protest at the last moment and prevent him from taking part in the mission.

What Fyrn could not know was that Rhodan had told Pucky to keep him

under constant observation so that the mousebeaver could take action at the least sign of anything suspicious. In case Berhaan was correct and Fyrn should actually turn out to be a spy, they would best be able to counteract his maneuvers if he were always close at hand.

Atlan's voice rang in their helmet speakers. "We're waiting for the order to start, Barbarian!"

The Akons had only reluctantly recognized Atlan as a signatory treaty partner in the galactic alliance. For them an Arkonide was nothing more than a degenerated descendant of a minor colonial people stemming from their own race. Placing his old friend at the exact focal point of events had been a psychological chess move on Rhodan's part. It was a maneuver that the Akons had seen through but they had tolerated it with sullen reluctance. Rhodan wanted to prove to the Akons that an Arkonide could be of as much assistance as an Akon or a Terran.

Now the Administrator surveyed the group of men before him who were loaded down with all the equipment that had been gathered for the mission. Behind them soared the lofty energy arc of the transmitter, a technical miracle conceived by highly-developed Akon brains.

He raised his arm. The cumbersome spacesuit sleeve concealed his lean slenderness. On his helmet was a yellow flame insignia which designated him as the leader. "Let's get started," he said simply.

With these words he picked up his share of the equipment packs and moved forward. Without hesitation the mutants and scientists of the group followed him. They walked slowly into the transmitter.

Not without good reason, Berhaan considered himself to be one of the best transmitter experts in the Blue System. He had personally taken charge of the final inspections before the commando group approached the arc-gate of the transmitter. Secretly he regretted the fact that he could not accompany Rhodan, but he realized that his presence on Arkon III was more important. He thought of Fyrn who was now somewhere among these men. Naturally Rhodan had not intervened for him merely because they had drunk coffee together in the cafe. Perhaps the Solar Administrator might not be as intelligent as the leading scientists of the Blue System, but he had an astonishing capacity for putting two and two together, which was combined with an incisive perception of every situation. Berhaan accepted the tall Terran unreservedly as an equal partner. He was sure that Rhodan would never commit treason against an ally. Nevertheless the man was dangerous. Whatever he did or planned was primarily in the interests of the human race – that civilization which had emerged from a tiny system on

the edge of the Milky Way and spread itself almost across the galaxy by now.

However, Berhaan's race was older and more mature. The Akons had seen younger races bloom and die. He was convinced that sooner or later the Terrans would follow the same road to destruction, nor would their astonishing vitality serve to change the pattern.

Berhaan looked over at the transmitter. Rhodan was easily recognized by his helmet symbol. Here was a man who was not content to issue orders from the center of his government. Instead, he was always risking his life in the front line of conflict. Inconceivable, thought Berhaan inconceivable and dangerous.

The commando group stepped through the arc-gate, and Rhodan's gleaming helmet disappeared.

And then it happened!

There was a flash inside the energy arc. A mighty jet of flame seemed to split the transmitter in two. None of the men could be seen. Berhaan jumped up, noting that the Terran technicians were storming across the open area toward the transmitter. More lightnings flashed. The energy discharges were so strong that Berhaan detected a shimmering glow on the upper edge of the main arc.

His initial tension slowly subsided but the sudden shock left him trembling. He started to run, yet at the same time he was aware of the uselessness of his haste. Rhodan and his men had vanished through the arc. No technician, however skilled, would be able to bring them back now. Perhaps they had landed safely on the tender's platform.

Berhaan doubted it. Something had gone wrong. An unforeseen reaction had caused interference with the transmitter.

A technician in a white uniform caught up with him. He was a small man with crewcut hair. In his hand was a tool with which he pointed toward the transmitter.

"Did you see that?" he shouted. "Something's out of order there!"

Although the Akon fought against it, he was absorbing some of the other's anxiety. The first alarm sirens started to howl. Red emergency trucks came racing from their sheds at a reckless speed.

Berhaan saw Reginald Bell approaching, who was Rhodan's 2nd-in-command. The Akon had already heard about the close friendship that existed between the two men. Bell's face was unusually pale at the

moment.

Without preliminaries he asked, "How long will it be before anybody can enter the transmitter?"

"As long as we don't know what happened to Rhodan, I'll not take the responsibility of releasing the transmitter for further use," Berhaan declared.

"I'll put on a spacesuit," Bell retorted, "and I'll go in on my own responsibility.

"Berhaan shook his head. "You'll do no such thing. If something has happened to those men, no foolhardiness is going to change it."

The lightning discharges had subsided inside the arc-gate. Now the transmitter presented its normal appearance.

Bell's voice sounded louder than before. "If they're not on the tender, where can they be?"

Into Berhaan's mind came an image of the galaxy. No, he pondered even that was too limited an area. An icy chill ran through him. He answered Bell in such a low voice that it was almost drowned out by the shrill howling of the sirens. "They could be in any conceivable place in the universe . . ."

Bell's eyes glistened strangely but his face remained expressionless. Berhaan noticed that he had clenched his fists so tightly that the knuckles were white. "How could such a thing happen?" he asked. "There's only one explanation for it," said Berhaan. "Some extra-dimensional discharge of energy has interfered with the transmitter transfer." Bell looked beyond the red emergency vehicles that still hurtled past him. "Are you sure that Perry didn't reach the tender?"

"It would seem so," replied Berhaan regretfully.

Then Bell said something that the Akon would never forget. "We'll make a search for them," he declared.

Berhaan was sure that the Terran was not unaware of the magnitude of the universe. However, this was like suggesting that they should search for a specific grain of sand in the immensity of the ocean depths.

Reginald Bell raised his arm like a man swearing an oath. "We'll find them," he said.

3.

THE INFERNAL WORLD

The sphere of bluish haze reached from one end of infinity to the other. Its vapor-like substance seemed to fill the entire universe, or that in which he floated. He didn't actually float because he had no physical mass with which he might have accomplished such a complex process. He existed only as consciousness, as a part of this space without beginning or end.

In the moment when the transmitter had begun to operate, Rhodan's shout of warning had faded away. He had felt instinctively that something was not right, but his warning came too late. The transmitter hurled the energy equivalent of the men into nothingness.

Perhaps they were all still alive if one might refer to their present state of existence as "life." Amazingly, Rhodan could see although he told himself that this was purely an abstract process that was occurring without the help of his eyes. Whether he occupied the entirety of this spherical space or was only an infinitesimal part of it he could not know, since there was no system of reference here. He recalled the words of Descartes: "I think, therefore I am!" Yet for himself in this moment, didn't this saying acquire new meaning? What would happen if he ceased to think? In fact, how could he be thinking at all? Then he saw something that had been there all the time, suspended with him in this incredible sphere. It was a narrow streak of luminosity.

He discerned more of the light streaks. They seemed to animate the sphere like fish in murky water. What did they represent? Were they perhaps island universes or galactic masses of energy?

Then he was aware that the sphere moved. It was not an impulsive movement. It was less apparent than it was to be surmised. Rhodan felt no fear; in fact he could not emotionally define his present state. This meant that he had no feeling. He had become an incomprehensible part of this indefinable substance, an observer of pure objectivity.

Suddenly one of the light streaks widened, as if someone were magnifying a photograph. Gradually the streak acquired an oval shape like an elongated egg, whose extremities seemed to absorb the hazy luminosity of its center.

The gradation of dimensions – how far did it actually extend? Didn't each dimension presuppose a higher extension in which its existence was

rooted? The six-dimensional blue defense screen of the Akons could only function because there was a superordinate something to support its interchange of energy. No one could say that there was an end somewhere, that beyond this there was still only nothing or an unfilled vacuum, because even a vacuum required some physical reference or stabilization.

Without any sense of disillusionment, Rhodan realized that the limitation of the human brain was that it was only created for three-dimensional space. It could not perceive extra-dimensional relationships. If there were two-dimensional beings existing practically as shadows on a flat surface, they would be incapable of understanding or even recognizing a three-dimensional object.

While the oval shape continued to increase in size and brightness, Rhodan realized that here in the maze of dimensions he could never perceive anything exceeding *three* – dimensional impressions. This was why everything seemed to be so confusing and incomprehensible. If he had been capable of understanding superordinate dimensions, his entire surroundings would have made some kind of sense.

The movement of the sphere continued. It was a vast rotation, a turning in space and time that seemed to move everything that was contained within it.

Rhodan thought of Major Bassaldari who would now be watching the tender's platform in vain. Now? He could only presume that it was happening "now" because there was no way of judging how much time had passed, whether in a real or relative sense. Rhodan thought of their planned operation against the Posbis with the same detachment as he felt for his surroundings. It was not possible for him to register remorse for the mishap. He had become a thinking but emotionless part of the sphere – a sphere that rotated.

The oval luminosity spread out concavely before him as if it were being drawn over an invisible form. Then dark spots appeared in it. It ruptured suddenly as if it were a combined protuberance of countless giant suns.

Astonishingly, Rhodan was conscious of turning although he had no physical existence, no point of reference, no axis of alignment, no absolute center point, and no actual sensation of movement. He was merely aware of his rotation as though it were some mechanical function of a well-organized whole. The dark spots increased. They seemed to dominate the bright areas of the oval. The entire shape was now superimposed over the smaller light streaks. Only the sphere itself was still larger.

His intellectual concern was now for the other men. Where were they? Were they drifting around like himself in this substance? Nor was he the only one that the misdirected energy of the transmitter had catapulted into limbo? What would Fyrn be thinking? Perhaps now he was ready to face the Supreme Council of the Akons and die as a spy, in preference to lingering forever in this unreal state of existence.

The protuberance was so scattered out now that it resembled an open-mesh net, but it continued to separate. It would not be long before only a few light points would remain to suggest the presence of the oval form. The whole thing took on the aspect of a slightly overcast starry firmament. Perhaps the lights were stars, or material masses in gaseous form which had been thrown out from some cosmic explosion. The sphere rotated majestically, whirling millions of the luminosities around with it. Sometimes it brought them closer to each other, then it would hurl them apart. And in the process they seemed to alternately expand and then contract.

Rhodan remained unaffected by the entire procedure. In spite of these arbitrary phenomena, he thought he could detect a system to it all. A spiral of energy began to whirl up out of the torn maze of the protuberance. It was funnel-shaped, and its wider end was approaching his dematerialized self. The mouth of the funnel could have measured millions of kilometers in diameter, or it might be only half a meter wide. Who could say? He tried to discern the other end of the formation, but it seemed to reach into infinity.

Now the spiral engulfed him, making a sharp demarcation between himself and the grayish mist of the sphere. He drifted deeper into the funnel – or at least he believed it was happening, for it was also possible that he wasn't moving at all. Whatever the nature of the spiral's energy might be, just a small fraction of it would certainly have been enough to sweep the Solar System away as if it had been caught up in an electrical storm of cosmic proportions.

Was it the spiral that had interfered with the transmitter?

It was immaterial now. Rhodan was surrounded by a gleaming brilliance, yet he had no eyes, no retinas or pupils with which to protect himself from the glare. He was only a mental entity.

While he hurtled into the spiral, even his thinking faded away. In one moment he thought he could comprehend something of the tremendous happenings around him, but in the next moment all perception went blank.

But the sphere continued to rotate, its movement encompassed infinity and

its bluish-gray mist was everywhere. Within that sphere Rhodan had ceased to be a measurable factor, yet he was subject to its processes.

Something had reached out to him.

Whatever it might be, after an indefinable span of time, it was bringing him back.

But he emerged neither on Arkon III nor on the platform of fleet tender *BA-F333*.

*

Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Intelligence, maintained a file in which all assignments sent to his department were arranged in order of priority. However, a few minutes after he was informed about the disappearance of Rhodan's commando group, this division of his file was superfluous. It was clear to Mercant that all he could be concerned with now was but a single task: Rhodan had to be found.

Reginald Bell's troubled features were still visible on the big viewscreen. He seemed to look down into the room as he continued to speak. "Meanwhile, we've lifted the radio silence and made contact with the fleet tender. Major Bassaldari reports that not a single man has come out onto the platform."

Mercant ran a hand over his semi-bald pate thoughtfully. To him the problem was more fraught with criminal possibilities than technical ones. "Have you talked to the Akon technicians?" he asked. "Do you think it's possible that they've deliberately caused this accident?"

"Naturally that possibility can't be ruled out," Bell admitted, "but I rather doubt it. The likelihood of our retaliation against the Blue System is too big a risk for the Akons to take."

On the wall next to the viewscreen was a 3-dimensional star chart. Red circles designated Terran areas of influence where agents had been assigned. They would have reported immediately if Rhodan had made an unexpected appearance somewhere.

"Do the Akons believe the men are dead?" asked Mercant abruptly.

After a moment of hesitation, Bell answered in a level tone of voice. "Of course there's the possibility that Rhodan's group may be hung up somewhere between the dimensions – which for us would be the same as saying they're dead. But the Akons claim that an unknown energy disturbance could have distorted the jump coordinates."

“And what would that mean?”

“Well –” Bell made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “It means that Perry could be anywhere in the universe.” He shook his head. “Come to think of it, those commandos don’t have any powerful hypercom equipment. Each of them has the usual helmet radio, and Perry’s the only one who took along a wrist band micro-transceiver – but even that has a limited range. So there’s little hope that they’ll be able to contact us.”

Mercant’s fingertip traced the fine grain of wood on his desktop. “So that means that we’ll have to start a search.” he said.

“With everything we’ve got,” confirmed Bell.

Involuntarily, Mercant glanced up again at the star map. The fleets of the galactic alliance consisted of thousands of ships. They would be swarming over the entire galaxy to search for any sign of Rhodan. Nevertheless they would never be able to cover more than a tiny part of the Milky Way.

Bell seemed to grow impatient. “Well, what are you thinking about, Allan?” he asked.

Mercant smiled sadly. “It’s something I had always considered to be an impossibility,” he answered, “but we have urgent need of it now – a miracle!”

*

Now he recalled everything in sharp detail. During the secret meeting he had stood up and volunteered. They had praised him for it – not as fervently as his youthful imagination had pictured it – but it was praise and esteem nevertheless. Even old Brosanor, whom he had always regarded as false, crafty and malicious – he, too, had come forward to shake his hand.

Then they had taken him into the lab section. He remembered that he had been pale and trembling when he approached the table covered with white cloth. The voice of Kopaar the physician came back to him now. He could recall his face quite clearly and hear his words again:

“When you wake up you will remember nothing,” he had explained. “You will think that you are a transmitter technician. You will have no knowledge of being a spy for our underground movement. Later, when you come back, you will have to lie down on this table again, so that we may return your memory to you. Then you will report to us where the vulnerable parts of the alliance are to be found.”

“That I will do,” Fyrn recalled having answered vehemently.

An oval-shaped hood had been lowered over his head, finally enshrouding him in darkness.

And now . . . He suddenly knew that he was a spy. His memory had returned although he must still be somewhere on Arkon III.

No! At this moment he was not on Arkon III. He had gone through the transmitter gate with the other men. For a long time he had lingered in a dream-like state where the past and present had been all mixed up in a tangled kaleidoscope of confusing impressions.

Suddenly, reality had returned to him with a jolt. They had not reached their goal. Something had gone wrong.

Slowly, Fyrn opened his eyes.

*

For Rhodan, rematerialization brought with it a shock of physical pain, but this was due more to the violent readjustment of his mind than it was to the actual process itself. Simultaneously his other senses returned to him suddenly.

He felt solid ground under his feet. As his surroundings became visible he heard the sounds of the other men nearby. A dark red illumination was coming from an unseen source. It gave the room an eerie aspect.

Rhodan tensed. They were neither dead nor suspended in an incomprehensible universe. He vaguely recalled the time he had spent in a state of unreality and it brought back a shudder.

Then he heard Atlan in his helmet speaker. The Arkonide's tone was sarcastic. "From all appearances we haven't come out on board the fleet tender."

Gradually the dark-red illumination revealed their surroundings. Rhodan estimated that the room they were in must be about 100 meters high. It was enclosed by spherical walls. Somebody had managed to interfere with the transmitter on Arkon III so that they had missed their goal. Whether this had been intentional or unintentional could not be determined at the moment. He noted that the walls were bristling with spike-like protuberances.

Then he turned to the men. All of them had come through with him into this strange environment. Even their field equipment, scientific devices and weapons were here. Perhaps now the stubbornness of the scientists who had burdened them with all this equipment would prove to be

advantageous.

“Berhaan was right,” said someone. “I am actually a spy.”

“Fyrn!” exclaimed Rhodan, surprised. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“During the transition my memory came back,” replied the Akon. “So why should I wait for your mutants to find out that I’m working for a subversive movement that’s trying to sabotage the alliance?”

“I’d say it’s completely unimportant now whether you’re a spy or not. You’re right in the same trap with us,” said Rhodan.

“I’m not just a simple observer,” cried Fyrn angrily. “I am loyal to my duty. It’s my personal conviction that the galactic alliance will be the downfall of the Blue System. That’s why the founders and promoters of this coalition must be opposed. They didn’t take my memory from me because I was untrustworthy – it was to shield me from the mutants!”

Rhodan felt cold anger rising in him. They still didn’t know where the devil they were. It was highly possible that they might be attacked at any moment. Yet here was this fanatic spouting off his propaganda.

“All right, Fyrn,” he said sharply, “so now we all know where we stand, okay?” He paused briefly to locate the Akon among the others. “Take his weapon from him,” he ordered.

Fyrn protested but he could not prevent Goratschin from disarming him. The two-headed mutant stuck the weapon in his belt. In his special spacesuit with two helmets he presented a fantastic spectacle.

One of the heads spoke. “It’s taken care of, chief.”

Ivan Ivanovitch Goratschin, who only had one body for his two thinking brains, was the most unusual of the human mutants in the Corps. Psychologists had always pointed out the fact that he was practically two entities in one body. It was amazing that no serious internal conflicts or complexes had resulted. Goratschin’s heads were able to concentrate on the carbon atoms of animate or inanimate objects and create a chain reaction. Depending on the extent of the reaction, arbitrarily controlled by the mutant, the resultant nuclear explosions varied accordingly.

Rhodan paid no further attention to the Akon. “Does anybody have the slightest idea of what this place is?” he asked. “Can you technicians draw any conclusions from the structure of it?”

Van Moders spoke up. “Obviously it’s an alien type of receiver station. It’s quite possible that a powerful output of energy from here could have affected the transmitter on Arkon III.”

"If that's the case," said Rhodan, "then where is the exit, young man?"

Normally the robotics expert did not shy away from advancing bold theories, but now he only mumbled something unintelligible. The reddish illumination in the room gradually became dimmer.

Rhodan turned on his helmet lamp. "I think we're going to have to force our way outside," he announced. "I can't see any doors here."

"Outside, Perry?" queried Atlan. "What do you think it's like out there?"

Rhodan smiled, "Not a bad question, Admiral. But we're wearing our suits, so even the most poisonous atmosphere couldn't affect us. We might even discover a new Garden of Eden."

Atlan drew his weapon calmly. "All right then," he said, "let's blast our way into Paradise."

John Marshall, the leader of the mutants, was more cautious. "The builders of this room might not be too happy about our slicing up these walls."

"Can you detect any thought impulses, John?" queried Rhodan.

"No, chief, but it's possible that such emanations could be screened."

Rhodan thought a moment. Marshall was right from one standpoint. Breaking out of here by force could be interpreted by other beings as a hostile action. On the other hand, their being prisoners here wasn't doing much for friendly relations. A will to make some kind of decision and to find out where they were tipped the scales. "We will cut a hole in the wall," he ordered.

The heavy steel plate was not able to withstand the concentrated fire from 10 impulse weapons. Within a few minutes an opening was melted through the wall. The ragged edges of the hole glowed red but soon cooled down and darkened. The heat from it added to the outside temperature which was already unusually high. Rhodan guessed that their spacesuits had probably saved their lives. The air-conditioning units handled the extra load without effort.

The now familiar reddish light came through the blasted-out hole, causing the place to look like a scene from one of the late-late TV space movies which were still viewed occasionally in Terrania. But this before them was hard reality. With weapon in hand, Rhodan thrust the upper part of his torso through the opening. The cupola-shaped room where they had materialized was in a dome-like hall that also arched 100 meters above the floor. In the background he could see shadowy machine shapes. The reddish light made it difficult for him to make out details, but it was clear that all visible

motion here was of a mechanical nature.

Rhodan was bothered by the thought that they might have landed in a Posbi station, yet such an idea was absurd. The Posbis had no matter transmitters. Cautiously, he climbed completely out of their prison. "Atlan!" he called softly. "Pucky and Goratschin! Follow me!" He waited until Atlan had joined him.

The latter made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "I don't see any reception committee anywhere," he complained. "Apparently we are merely victims of chance, after all."

"Do you think that makes our situation any better?" asked Van Moders, who had followed Pucky and Goratschin.

Rhodan interrupted the rising discussions among the men. "We still can't tell for certain if anybody is aware of us yet. In any case, we'll take a look around."

Van Moders seemed to agree with this idea as he pressed through to Rhodan's side. There was no need on Rhodan's part to issue special instructions or warnings. All of the men were trained and had been briefed as to what they should do. The specialists of the group were busy pulling their equipment through the opening.

Meanwhile, Rhodan and his party were approaching the machines that had been installed in the large chamber. It was quite evident that they were in operation although it could not be determined what they were accomplishing.

Atlan stopped a few meters from a towering apparatus that was sectionalized by slanting pillars. "Perry," he said, "this machine reminds me of something I've seen somewhere before."

"Perhaps you'll share your idea with us, Imperator?" Van Moders had a proprietary attitude with regard to his own field of machines and automation.

Instead of answering, Atlan went closer to the apparatus. Rhodan examined it also, searching for something familiar in the incomprehensible structure.

"Wait a minute!" said Atlan, and he hurried over to an adjacent machine. Seconds later he announced: "I was right. Their principle of operation is the same as the others I remember. There's an amazing similarity of design. They are the same as the machines on Mechanical!"

Before Van Moders could contradict him, other technicians were voicing their agreement. The specialists had arrived in the meantime and concerned

themselves with the apparatuses before them.

“That’s true, sir!” said Dr. Bryant. “There’s no doubt that Atlan is correct. These machines could have even come from Mechanica!”

Rhodan cut off the ensuing hubbub with a quick gesture. “I know exactly what you’re all thinking,” he said. “Mechanica is a gas cloud, an exploded planet. It does not exist anymore as a solid body.”

“Maybe there was a time shift during our transmitter jump,” suggested Pucky half-heartedly. “Absolutely impossible,” retorted Fyrn, who had been silent since being disarmed. “There has never been such an effect during a transmitter transfer.”

Rhodan raised both arms to calm everybody down. “I don’t believe that this similarity is a coincidence,” he said. “The unknown inhabitants of Mechanica built an entire robotized civilization. It’s possible they also developed other planets along the same lines. There’s also the possibility that they had trade relations with other races. These machines could have been purchased from them or as the result of exchange or barter.”

What puzzled Rhodan was the fact that neither a living being nor a robot had appeared so far. Their surroundings gave the impression that everyone here had cleared out swiftly just seconds before their arrival. Everything seemed to be waiting for the actual proprietors to return.

The group moved onward until they reached the entrance into a giant building that was apparently a factory. They came upon an inoperative assembly conveyor that reached farther into the great hall. Evidently only the other machines they had seen were working. When they came closer to the conveyor belt, Rhodan observed that some misshapen or clumsy-looking shapes were lying on it.

“Perry!” exclaimed Atlan. “There on the assembly belt!”

They were robots, lying in closely-spaced sequence on the conveyor, as if they were waiting to be transported further. Their shells gave off a dull glitter in the dim light. Rhodan made a cautious approach. It didn’t make sense that the assembly belt should be inoperative while the fabrication machines were working. There was every indication that somebody had just gotten into production – somebody who had been interrupted by the sudden advent of the Terrans. The robots on the conveyor were not yet complete. At close range it could be seen that some of their parts were missing. In spite of this, their strange appearance was somehow familiar to the men.

“They remind me of something,” muttered Rhodan pensively as he moved

more closely to the belt.

“I can tell you what it is, sir,” declared Van Moders as he joined him. “These machines look like Posbis.”

Involuntarily, Rhodan took a step back. Van Moders had analyzed the situation correctly. On the conveyor belts of this giant hall lay thousands of Posbis, waiting for completion. But something wasn't quite right about these robots. In the first place, they were all of one design or model, while the Posbis were highly differentiated. Also, these half-assembled machines were definitely combat robots, which was never the case with the Posbis. Although most of the latter were fighters they had never developed a specialized warrior class.

Rhodan labored with the problem. Where was the connection here? Robots that looked like Posbis but were not. Machines from a planet that only existed now as a cloud of gas.

Rhodan was certain that they had stumbled onto something here that might cast an entirely new light on everything they had learned thus far about the Posbis. There was evidently some relationship between Mechanica and the Posbis, a connection that it was necessary to fathom. The accident – if it *was* an accident – had led them to a place where they might solve the mystery of the Posbis more readily than on one of the robots' stations. Rhodan suspected that the whole key to the riddle was to find what the connection was between Mechanica and the Posbis.

Van Moders had been making a closer examination of one of the metal bodies on the conveyer. “It's strange,” he said. “I could swear that there's a difference between the Posbis we know and these things here on belt. One might say that these are imitations – and good ones at that.”

“Or would you make that stronger and say somebody is trying to duplicate the Posbis?” queried Dr. Bryant.

Van Moders ran his gloved hand over the robot before him. “I wouldn't go that far,” he answered. “It wouldn't be so easy to obtain a sample to copy.” He smiled, and added: “I'd rather say that here the development is going in another direction.”

They moved farther along the conveyor and finally came to a machine that awakened Van Moders' interest again.

“Imperator,” he called to Atlan, “what do you make of this one?”

After making a brief inspection, Atlan replied, “This is a machine from Mechanica. Its construction is completely different.”

Having investigated the harvest and seed ships of the Mechanica beings, the Terrans had a fairly good idea of how the machines from that planet were constructed. Every member of the group had at least seen films of Mechanica.

Van Moders pointed to another machine. “But this one has nothing to do with Mechanica. It works on an entirely different principle. Yet it’s here on the same assembly belt.”

This new discovery indicated the connection between Mechanica and the Posbis. Here was a point of attack for further conjecture.

“Let’s assume that this equipment was set up by unknown entities for the purpose of manufacturing Posbis,” said Rhodan. “All machinery they couldn’t build, themselves, they were able to obtain from Mechanica. That might explain this mixture of different kinds of construction.”

“That sounds logical, sir,” Van Moders conceded, “but I still have another opinion. The overall setup of this factory installation makes it completely obvious that it was based originally on the technology of Mechanica. The dissimilar pieces of apparatus were only added later. I maintain that two different races or cultures have worked here – each of them at a different time.”

“One of them was the race from Mechanica,” said Rhodan, “but what was the other one?”

“That’s hard to say,” replied Van Moders. “In any case we should proceed very cautiously. There’s every indication that living beings were here not too long ago.”

Rhodan realized that they could spend endless hours wandering around in this subterranean factory without finding a solution to the problem. There was more to consider than their immediate task. Sooner or later they would have to try making contact with the Solar Fleet.

Even the high-capacity air systems of their space suits couldn’t continue working forever.

“We have to find a way to reach the surface of this world,” he said. “We’ll probably find some other points of reference there. It might even be possible to determine the planet’s location.”

Rhodan noted that his instruments indicated an exterior temperature of 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Why was it so hot in this place?

Ras Tschubai and Pucky had been exploring by means of short teleport jumps. They finally discovered an escalator ramp of the kind they had seen

on Mechanica. It led upward and was still in operation. However, Dr. Bryant and Goratschin also found an antigrav lift in the same area, which had evidently been added at a later time. It was another piece of evidence pointing to the fact that beings other than those of Mechanica had sought to profit by this subterranean factory installation – or were still doing so.

Rhodan gave orders for combat readiness in case anybody saw anything suspicious or if they should be attacked. He sensed an increasing uneasiness. The men assembled near the escalator ramp. He raised an arm for attention.

“None of us knows what may be waiting for us on the surface,” he said. “We could all get ourselves killed by making any rash moves. Before we go up the ramp, I want Pucky and Ras to make a short reconnaissance jump, so that we’ll know what it looks like outside.”

Ras Tschubai adjusted his spacesuit belt. Pucky, who had been amazingly reticent, went over and joined him silently.

“I don’t want you teleporters to take any risks,” Rhodan admonished them. “As soon as you’ve gotten your orientation, I want you back here.”

“What should we do if we’re attacked?” queried Tschubai.

“Exactly what I told you. Stay out of trouble and jump back here.”

Tschubai smiled and gave Pucky a light nudge on the shoulder. Like Goratschin, the mousebeaver wore a custom-made spacesuit to accommodate his “non-standard” form. Suddenly, the usual shimmer occurred, and the two teleporters vanished, borne on the wings of their paranormal powers.

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They materialized into a night of fathomless darkness. Only the solid ground under his feet and an instinct born of years of experience told Ras Tschubai that he had actually reached the surface.

“Slightly dark around here, Shorty,” he said to Pucky. “If this is supposed to be night time, where did the stars go to?”

“Maybe there’s a heavy layer of clouds that shuts out the light,” surmised Pucky.

Tschubai switched on his searchlight. The bright beam swept across dark-brown earth that was cracked and fissured. There was nothing but hard stone under their feet. “It looks as if it gets super bright around here in the daytime,” he said. He checked the external temperature. “Amazingly low . .

. Either that means that there's no atmosphere to retain the heat of the day, or there hasn't been any daytime here for an unthinkable number of years."

Pucky also had his lamp on and was making a systematic observation of the ground. "No traces of vegetation," he announced. "No, I don't think there's any atmosphere here. At the most there might be some poisonous gases in the daytime when this ground starts baking in the fire of the sun."

Tschubai carefully swept his light about him before he ventured to move on a little farther. "If this planet still has a rotation cycle, sometime or other it must get bright here," he said. "Then it must be uncomfortable. I'll bet the temperature gets up over the boiling point."

"That would mean that the planet orbits very close to its sun," said Pucky. "But it could also be that for some reason it doesn't rotate any more —" He interrupted himself and suddenly cried out: "By all the stars, Ras, look! The galaxy!"

Tschubai didn't understand him immediately. It was only when he saw the pointing beam of Pucky's head lamp lose itself in the darkness above him that he caught sight of the narrow belt of distant stars that seemed to be floating in infinity.

"We're out here in the Abyss," said Pucky, "thousands of light years from the Milky Way." The tone of his voice reflected his chagrin. Their chances of rescue now were very remote. How would they ever be able to bridge the vastness that separated them from their home galaxy?

Tschubai was also considering the full implications of their hopeless situation, but he made a decision. "We have to risk a jump to the daylight side," he said. "Maybe we can find out more about this mystery planet or its sun . . ." He paused and Pucky heard him draw in his breath sharply. "That is," he added skeptically, "if it has a sun at all!"

The two teleporters grasped hands and made a long-range jump. This time when they materialized, a scene of primitive grandeur presented itself to them. The rising sun hung over the near horizon, which meant that the planet not only had its own star but a cycle of rotation as well. A flying red light spread out over the ghostly landscape, which only now revealed its tortured and fissured configuration.

The absence of an atmosphere created sharp contrasts of light and shadow. All visible areas were set off in painfully clear detail while total night reigned within the shadows. The rising sun was red, bathing the barren land in a blood-red light. The two mutants watched the mighty spectacle in silence. Their air-conditioning units began to work at maximum capacity."

“The sun, Ras,” Pucky whispered. “We’ve seen it before . . .”

Tschubai made an effort to tear his gaze from the tremendous view. He struggled for a moment to grasp the impact of Pucky’s words. “What are you talking about?” he asked somewhat tensely.

“It’s the star we call ‘Outside’,” he answered. “It’s the same sun that Mechanica used to orbit around.”

“But we’re not on Mechanica,” argued Tschubai, his voice rising. In a purely automatic movement he switched off his head lamp which had become superfluous.

“No,” admitted Pucky. “What we’re standing on is the innermost planet of the system. It’s only moon-sized. The other time we were in this area, our scientists didn’t visit it because they figured that with a surface temperature of 230 degrees Fahrenheit there wouldn’t be any life here worth talking about.”

Tschubai began to consider these facts with a new intensity. The consequences of the discovery were still not all evident, but it now seemed certain that the long-extinct race of Mechanica had once established a base here. Other beings had since come here to produce robots that were remarkably similar to the Posbis. He suspected that a further investigation of the small planet would definitely uncover more information concerning the former inhabitants of Mechanica. They would not have placed a base on this overheated world without reason. Perhaps it was an emergency setup. Wasn’t there evidence here to suggest that the builders of the harvest and seed ships had been fleeing from something?

The Terran scientists had verified that Mechanica had been violently shoved out of its original orbit, which had removed the reptilian inhabitants from the life-giving warmth of the sun. Had they sought in their desperation to find a new refuge here?

Who had given the extinct reptiles so much trouble? It was clear to Tschubai that the connection between Mechanica and the Posbis could be found here. The missing factor was the unknown race who had taken over production inside this planet, and it was highly probable that they were the same enemy who had attacked Mechanica.

Even if Tschubai didn’t know yet who the enemy was, he considered his reasoning to be valid. At least now the relationship between Mechanica and the unknown people was clear. What role did the Posbis play in this complex situation? Was their similarity to the half-completed robots a mere coincidence?

Tschubai suddenly sensed that they had stumbled onto something here that had its beginnings in an unthinkable remote past. From a cosmic standpoint this conflict had been going on for countless years, and seeing only a tiny part of it all could present quite a riddle. Then an idea occurred to the African that made him catch his breath. Now he thought he knew who the mysterious enemy was!

When he pieced the individual parts together, as in a mosaic, everything fit precisely. A cold chill ran through him when he realized that they had been dropped into the middle of a gigantic conflict. One of the belligerents had already been eliminated: the beings of Mechanica had not survived. But the conquering foe continued the fierce and unrelenting battle.

Now everything was clear to Tschubai.

The successors of Mechanica were not fighting in response to orders from their creators. Their belligerence had been unleashed because of a mistake on the part of the enemies of Mechanica. Tschubai thought he knew now what that mistake was.

And he also knew who had made it.

4.

ATTACK OF THE LAURINS

John Marshall sensed their presence first. Without the excellent telepath's warning, the team of scientists and mutants probably would have been defenselessly exposed to a sudden attack.

Rhodan had become uneasy and checked his watch, thinking that the two teleporters should have been back by now. It was then that Marshall's voice had sounded in everyone's helmet speakers.

"Warning!" the telepath had called out calmly. "We have some visitors coming down the antigrav lift. I'm picking up some thought waves."

Rhodan reacted immediately. "Turn on your defense screens," came his order. "Seek cover behind the machines. Take all the equipment with you." His next comment revealed that he was calmly considering all possibilities. "Maybe it's Ras and Pucky."

"No," Marshall contradicted. "The impulses are alien . . ." Then suddenly he raised his voice. "In the name of Heaven, Chief, it's the Laurins!"

Rhodan's mind raced as he moved to take cover. What had brought the Laurins here? Were they also in search of the Posbis? He crouched in a niche behind one of the machines and observed the lift, although he knew that Laurins were invisible.

"They're gathered together in the lift entrance," Marshall reported. "There are a lot of them but they're not coming any closer."

Atlan spoke. "Perry, now can you guess who made the machines here that are different from those of Mechanica?"

"The Laurins!" exclaimed Van Moders. "You're right, Imperator – it fits!"

"How did they come here?" asked Rhodan. "Or more importantly, why?" He knew the question was rhetorical at the moment.

"Watch out!" warned Marshall. "I think they've discovered us."

It was nerve-racking to be facing an invisible enemy. They knew practically nothing about the Laurins other than the fact that they waged bitter battles against the Posbis. Also, it was known that they came from the measureless depths of the void between the galaxies. So what was their purpose here? Was it a mere thirst for conquest?

“They’re coming closer!” Marshall announced.

Almost in the same moment the Laurins opened a heavy attack with their weapons, causing the Terrans to withdraw further behind the machines. Immediately Rhodan noted that the attackers were trying to avoid damaging valuable factory equipment. But just now his own first concern was for the two teleporters.

From previous encounters with the Laurins the Terrans knew that thermal-action impulse weapons had little effect on them, except when it was possible to concentrate three or four of the beams on one of them simultaneously. On the other hand, disintegrators had always been more effective. Under a direct hit the victim would become faintly visible and cry out loudly. With concentrated fire the Laurins usually collapsed, becoming briefly visible before the moment of death.

“Disintegrators ready!” Rhodan ordered. “Marshall, you have to keep telling us approximately where they are.”

As Rhodan drew his own weapon he knew that their trump card in the battle was Ivan Ivanovitch Goratschin, the two-headed mutant. With his ability to locate carbon atoms and cause them to explode, he should be able to rattle the enemy considerably.

“Chief!” shouted Marshall. “Above you! Two of them are over you on top of that machine!”

Rhodan threw himself around just as the floor where he had been standing burst asunder and the force of the passing shot knocked him to one side. He took a hard fall. Above him there was a brilliant flash. Goratschin had made his first strike. At the same time the commandos opened fire with their disintegrators.

He crawled hastily between two massive pillars and grasped a cross-beam to pull himself to his feet. The battle had now broken out into full force. He waited until he saw the shadowy outline of an enemy. Then he took careful aim and fired.

“Reinforcements are coming out of the lift!” cried Marshall.

Rhodan knew that sooner or later the factory would prove to be a trap. The Laurins were still being careful about the machinery, but as soon as they realized they were facing heavy resistance they would come on more relentlessly. In that case the commando team wouldn’t have much chance of using the machines for cover. They had to reach the surface. Rhodan noted that the Laurins were apparently only using the lift.

“We have to try using the escalator ramp,” he instructed the others. “We

can't hold out here for long."

He shot at a Laurin who had become visible under the combined fire of two disintegrators. The creature emitted a piercing cry and expired.

"Give me a weapon!" shouted Fyrn.

A space-suited figure staggered into Rhodan's hiding place. It was Van Moders. Rhodan pulled him in next to him between the pillars and he could hear the other's labored breathing.

"Are you wounded?" he asked him.

"No. Goratschin exploded a Laurin only a few meters from me." Van Moders' serious young face was visible behind his faceplate. "You're right, Chief. We have to get out of here in a hurry. Maybe we'll have a chance on the surface."

A man could be seen climbing up the face of the machine opposite them. His movements in the spacesuit seemed heavy and awkward and he had no cover against enemy fire.

Rhodan called to him firmly. "Come down from there before the Laurins see you!"

A stray shot hit the upper part of a vertical brace the man was hanging onto. The rod tore loose from its fastenings and sagged downward.

"That crazy fool!" yelled Van Moders. "He's liable to fall and kill himself!"

However, the man obtained a grip on the next upright support, whoever he was. They couldn't see his face. He was laboriously climbing higher. Rhodan left his cover and reached the other machine in a few swift strides. An energy beam streaked over him and shattered an apparatus that looked like a steam boiler.

The next shot was more carefully aimed. The climber lost his balance and only caught hold of an outjutting ledge by sheer luck. Hanging there half-blind and benumbed, he was now in greater danger of falling. The drop was far enough to kill him.

Determinedly, Rhodan began to climb.

"Chief!" shouted Van Moders. "You can't do that!"

Rhodan's gloved hands grasped the damaged tie-rod. It gave a little but still supported his weight. When he glanced below he saw at least a dozen of the men rushing to the ramp with drawn weapons. In the lead was the unmistakable figure of the big two-headed mutant, Goratschin.

The wounded man overhead began to sway. If he fell now he would take

Rhodan with him into the depths.

Rhodan compressed his lips. "Hold on," he called. "I'll be with you in a moment."

About 20 meters beneath him, some kind of compression tank exploded, emitting a blast of flame. Blinded, Rhodan closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he stretched his arm upward he could just touch the feet of the man above him, but that wasn't enough. He had to climb up until he was at least on the same level with the wounded man.

Marshall's voice rang in the helmet speakers. "Turn back, Ivan. They've managed to block your exit!"

For Rhodan this meant that the attempt to use the ramp had been in vain. With better determination he struggled upward. Finally his head was on a level with the other's helmet but the latter was turned at an angle so that he couldn't see him. At any rate, the wounded man would not be able to hold on a minute longer by himself.

"Put your arm around my neck," Rhodan told him.

The other moved sluggishly to obey, but without Rhodan's help he couldn't have managed it. "They're attacking again," called Marshall in a grim tone of voice.

"They're behind the machines."

Suddenly, Rhodan felt the full weight of the other man. He had to strain hard in order not to lose his grip. "Don't tear my head off!" he complained. "Otherwise we'll never make it." A raybeam shot past him. Slowly, he began to work himself downward with his burden.

"I think I'm going to pass out," said the wounded man.

Rhodan froze for a moment. It was the voice of the spy, Fyrn.

Before he had time to wonder about it, an energy beam struck the ledge he was just about to place his foot on. He heard Van Moders' piercing outcry just as Fyrn struggled desperately to throw himself forward to catch on to something. Then they both fell back and plunged below.

*

The sun turned the surface into a furnace where nothing that was exposed to its searing rays could live. In spite of the blinding brightness, here was an aspect of death. Nothing moved, except for the slowly changing shadows. At this extreme temperature the whole landscape seemed ready to crumble away. It spread out silently before the two teleporters, helplessly

exposed to the merciless heat.

Their air-regenerators were working at top capacity but their air-conditioning systems could no longer provide sufficient cooling. The temperature in their spacesuits began to rise. Ras Tschubai peered thru his light filter into the distance where the sun was reflected from a glistening surface.

"You'd almost think that was a lake out there," said Pucky in a depressed tone.

"Nothing's impossible," answered Tschubai. "At these temperatures, lead or tin would melt. You might be looking at a sea of molten metal."

"No wonder it's warm even under the surface," said the mousebeaver. "I can imagine that even there it's so hot in the daytime that it would only be bearable with the air-conditioning units. We'd be lost without our spacesuits."

It was hard for Tschubai to avoid looking at the sun repeatedly, as it seemed to exert a hypnotic attraction . . . The mutant was laboring under no illusions. Sooner or later, in spite of their spacesuits they would be faced with the problem of thirst and suffocation.

To him the prospects of being rescued were small. As a rough guess, fleet tender *BA-F333* was probably about 30000 light years distant from the star, Outside. There Maj. Bassaldari would be waiting for them in vain, but he would never get the idea of sending a search ship to a planet that scientists had long since dismissed from their minds because of its unimportance.

However, the planet was not unimportant now. It was the most important planet of all for the galactic alliance, because it offered the most direct solution to their problem.

Pucky made an ungainly shuffle toward Tschubai. In this desolation he seemed to be lost and helpless. The baked stone crumbled under the soles of their space boots. It was not any too safe to remain here on the surface, because everywhere there were cracks and fissures.

"Let's go back, Ras," Pucky suggested. "We should report this to Perry. Maybe with his micro-transceiver he could contact a patrol cruiser."

Tschubai doubted this but he didn't want to diminish the mousebeaver's hopes. "Okay, little guy," he answered calmly, "let's go back."

They both dematerialized and vanished from the inferno.

Almost instantly they appeared near the antigrav lift in the midst of the Laurins, who were still pressing into the factory hall below. Pucky was

immediately aware of the presence of the Invisibles, but Tschubai was quickly alerted since the heavy battle going on was not only self-evident – it confirmed his suspicions.

The Laurins were too much taken by surprise to react in time. The two mutants made a second jump and eluded them. Pucky materialized beside a machine and in the same instant felt someone grasp him and pull him back. Almost intuitively he saw two figures hurtling down toward him and he instantly used his telekinesis.

Van Moders, who had pulled him aside, let out a groan of relief as Pucky lowered the two men gently to the floor. Whereupon the mousebeaver suddenly found Rhodan gratefully patting his shoulder.

“That fall would have broken some bones at least, or else our spacesuits would have been damaged,” he said. He helped Fyrn to his feet, who glared at him morosely. “What did you hope to gain from a wild gamble like that?” he asked the Akon sharply. “Do you think it’s right for you to risk your life at a time like this?”

The spy retorted angrily. “I didn’t have any weapon, so I was trying to find a safe place.” A malicious tone came into his voice. “You didn’t know that it was me up there hanging helplessly, did you, Rhodan? You thought I was one of your own men.”

Van Moders took a step toward the Akon, but Rhodan held him back. “You’re right, Fyrn,” he said. “I didn’t think that it would be you.”

Fyrn snickered spitefully. “So I owe my life to a mistake.”

Rhodan didn’t answer. He drew Van Moders and Pucky with him under cover and Fyrn followed reluctantly. Marshall came running to them along with Tschubai.

The African looked at Pucky, then spoke to Rhodan. “Did he tell you, sir?” he asked.

“I haven’t had a chance yet,” chirped the mousebeaver.

Tschubai looked grim. “You may not think it’s possible, sir,” he said, “but we’re in the system of the sun, Outside – and on the innermost planet at that! The surface temperatures are over the boiling point. The sun has baked everything down to barren gray stone.”

“Outside” whispered Rhodan. “What do you think, Van Moders? Now everything is much clearer.”

“For one thing,” replied the robotics expert, “the question of these machines is answered. They actually have come from Mechanica. The

former inhabitants obviously established a base here.” He reflected a moment and then added: “One would have to assume that they had an urgent reason for doing so, because no one would normally select such a heat ball as this for a station.”

There was no doubt in Rhodan’s mind that the Laurins had made the later additions to the factory. Evidently what they were after was to obtain a foothold within the galaxy. They would be able to convert this isolated planet into a forward bastion without being disturbed. The accident that had brought the Terrans here must have also been a surprise to the Laurins. The receiver chamber that had been built long ago by the extinct reptile race must have interfered with their transmitter jump and diverted their course to this place. The Invisibles couldn’t have known that. They only saw that they had been discovered and were concerned about the base they had taken over. In other words, they were resisting an invasion.

Rhodan peered out cautiously from his refuge. Most of the men had taken positions behind the machines. Thus far the Laurins had not succeeded in making a breach thru their defense ring. Chiefly it was the human detonator, Ivan Goratschin, who was costing the enemy their greatest number of casualties. The problem was that only a few of the commandos were equipped with heavy impulse weapons and disintegrators. The lighter hand guns had little effect on the situation. The Laurins had the advantage on their side. Sooner or later they would be able to break the Terran resistance.

“This is Rhodan,” he said into his helmet mike. “We’ll make another attempt to get out thru the escalator ramp. All men carrying heavy weapons will open fire simultaneously on the enemy. The others will have to fight their way to the ramp while taking advantage of every possible cover. Ivan, you go with the latter group.”

“We’re ready, sir,” announced Marshall.

According to him, the Laurins had formed an open half-circle facing the Terrans, hoping to gradually enclose them in a pincers maneuver. But suddenly the Invisibles were surprised by a heavy counterfire. At the head of the advance group, Atlan made sure that impulse weapons were always concentrated in mass fire against the shadow outlines of the enemy whenever the disintegrators brought them to view.

“All right, Ivan,” called Rhodan, “let’s go!”

With an arm signal, he sprang from behind the machine and ran with drawn weapon toward the exit, which was at least 50 meters away. Now from

various cover points, figures of other men were darting and ducking forward. Rhodan made a sudden evasive maneuver and slipped behind a metal grating. Van Moders came in close behind him and tugged at his arm. "Up there – the balcony, sir!" he said. "What do you think about trying it from there?"

Right next to the escalator ramp there was a regular ramp leading to the low balcony above them where smaller machines were located. The metal grating in front of them reached up to the balcony and could be used as a ladder.

"It's a good idea," Rhodan agreed, as he stared aloft. "But there's also a disadvantage. Just before we reach it we won't have any cover."

An increasing number of men were crowding in behind the grating. Rhodan was convinced that a direct thrust toward the ramp would be disastrous. It would be much more advantageous to make an indirect approach from above, where there was ample cover almost to the exit. Moreover, the Laurins seemed just now to be fully occupied with Atlan's small fighting force.

Decisively, Rhodan took hold of the grating and drew himself upward. The metallic grid was at least 7 meters wide so that 4 men abreast could climb on it. Rhodan worked himself upward as fast as possible. Here they were like so many flies on a giant spider's web. The machine in front of the grid was still shielding him from the enemy's view.

The last part of the climb was the most dangerous. With calm deliberation, Rhodan placed his feet in one crossbar of the grid after another. A glance at the machine behind him revealed that within another half meter or so he would come into view of the Laurins. He was suddenly aware of the sweat running down his face. The external temperature must have increased tremendously. He felt that his mouth was completely dry. The vision of a cool drink of water occupied his mind so strongly that for a few seconds he forgot about the danger he was in.

He had reached the uppermost section of the grating. Suddenly Van Moders developed the agility of a monkey and left him a few feet behind. Rhodan had to hurry to overtake him. The thought of being shot in the back helped to accelerate his pace. Then he felt his hand close on the railing. He made a mighty swing and gained the balcony. As soon as he felt solid flooring under his feet, he paused to catch his breath. Van Moders, Dr. Bryant and Goratschin were already there. The factory mezzanine was crowded with smaller apparatuses and equipment. Probably the place was

used for storage.

Man after man, the commandos swarmed over the railing. Now the Laurins noted that they were only confronted by a small contingent of the enemy. More than 20 men had already reached the balcony when the grating was brought under heavy attack. A major section of it collapsed, hurling the remaining climbers back into the depths below. For a brief moment, Rhodan shut his eyes from the sight. Would they never be able to escape from this hell?

When he looked down from the railing he could see men crawling sluggishly out of the wreckage of the grating. One of the figures below had ceased to move. In his spacesuit he was like a large brown spot in the tangled glitter of the fallen grid.

Rhodan raised an arm to signal the others who were with him. They had to quickly traverse the steep ramp before the Laurins knew what they were up to. Rhodan led the way and the giant figure of Goratschin followed him like a shadow. One side of the downramp was supported by a terminal wall of the factory chamber. Here there were numerous niches and insets which had apparently been designed to contain other machines.

Rhodan called to Atlan over his helmet radio. "We're coming down the side-ramp. As soon as they see us and start their attack, leave your cover and storm the escalator ramp."

"We'll give 'em hell, Barbarian!" came Atlan's grimly humorous reply.

Rhodan had reached the beginning of the downramp. It slanted at a fairly steep angle, having been made for transportation machines. Since the grating was now destroyed, the only way down from the balcony lay before them. Everybody moved along in a series of short runs while ducking in and out of cover. Finally Rhodan felt his back pressed against the wall as he took refuge in the last niche prior to reaching the escalator ramp. In front of him, Goratschin's big frame filled the rest of the indentation.

"Here they come!" shouted Marshall.

In the next few seconds everything happened at once and they began to fire continuously with their heavy weapons. The Laurins had to divide their forces because they didn't know which enemy group was trying to break thru. Three of the creatures exploded as Marshall spotted their location and informed the two-headed "detonator."

As if in response to a secret command, the two teleporters appeared on a ledge above the escalator ramp. Tschubai was armed with a heavy disintegrator whereas Pucky relied on his telekinetic powers.

“Forward!” cried Rhodan.

Goratschin quickly caught up to him. The very appearance of the double-headed mutant must have had a bewildering effect on the Laurins. Several phantom silhouettes were visible in front of the automatic ramp. On the ledge above, Tschubai was fairly doing a dance to keep from presenting a fixed target. Then a direct hit blasted the teleporters’ platform out of the wall, but the Laurins were left no cause for triumph. Pucky and Tschubai dematerialized, only to reappear among Atlan’s fighters. A continuous roaring in Rhodan’s ears seemed to drown out all other sounds as Goratschin led the way down the ramp.

A concentrated fire from the Invisibles was causing their defense screens to flash and crackle warningly. The vanguard of Atlan’s group appeared under the blasted ledge. Rhodan ran onward, his legs going thru automatic motions. A tremendous discharge of energy exploded the entrance of the antigrav lift. The inner wall crashed into the hall with a thunderous rumbling, and suddenly the entire place was shrouded in a greenish haze. Poisonous-looking vapors rose from the floor and drifted sluggishly into the shattered lift as well as into the passage of the escalator ramp.

Rhodan didn’t dare to fire his weapon because he could hardly see. He stumbled over something that lay directly across his path. Somebody uttered a curse in a cracked voice. A figure in a spacesuit emerged out of the pall of vapors, reeled toward Rhodan and clutched at him for support. It was Bodien, one of the scientists.

“Hold on to me,” Rhodan told him.

For a brief moment he saw the man’s fear-filled eyes staring at him, uncomprehending and in a shock of pain. Before Rhodan could do anything, the wounded scientist let loose of him and vanished somewhere in the greenish fog.

Embittered, Rhodan pushed onward. Then Pucky was beside him, a diminutive and helpless-looking figure, but seldom had the appearance of the mousebeaver been more of a relief to him.

“Hold on tight, Perry,” chirped Pucky.

They had no sooner touched than they teleported, but when they materialized Perry saw that they had evidently traded one kind of hell for another. In the glaring daylight the surface of the planet was like a hot griddle. The entrance to the escalator ramp could be seen a slight distance away. Rhodan saw men emerging from it thru curtains of smoke. He took a big breath and then inadvertently looked directly at the sun. He staggered

back, momentarily blinded, and groped for his light filter. When it dropped into place it gave him instant relief.

"I have to go hack," said Pucky. "There are still some wounded men down there who can't make it on their own." In the same moment he disappeared.

Rhodan looked about him at this new environment. So that giant sun up there was Outside. Somewhere at the outer limits of its gravitational field circled a gas cloud that had once been Mechanica.

Gradually, he regained his power of decision. The first priority was to search for a refuge of some kind that could offer protection both from the sun and from the Laurins. Since the terrain was rocky and fissured, there should be many natural crevices and even some caves to hide in.

His attention was attracted to a needle of rock rising out of the ground about 100 meters away. That would make a good rendezvous point. He looked back toward the ramp entrance but none of the men were in its vicinity. Without further hesitation, he started toward the pillar of rock. It seemed that the sun's heat was almost palpable. When he ran his tongue over his lips they were already parched.

He glanced skeptically at the micro-transceiver on his arm. Would there be any sense in transmitting a distress signal? It was fairly unlikely that a fleet patrol cruiser would be in this sector of space. Still, they had to consider any possibility that might lead to their rescue.

As he walked, the weight of his body caused the stones to crumble under his feet. While he continued onward he wondered how many ships the Laurins might have landed on this planet. He didn't believe that they'd have more than one or two ships here in the Outside System, since it was obvious that the Invisibles had brought all available forces against them. But it would probably be easy for them to call in reinforcements at any time.

Rhodan was sure that in the meantime Bell and Mercant must have taken every step necessary to launch a search for them. Every department of the Solar Fleet would have sent out search patrols by now. The Fleet's high-precision sensors were always in operation. They would register any strong discharge of energy. If Rhodan's group could manage somehow to cause an explosion that would be strong enough to arouse the suspicions of an alert commander, then there might be a small chance that a Terran ship would show up here. But what could they detonate that would not endanger their own lives? For the time being, he saw no feasible possibility.

He had come within a few steps of the towering needle of rock. Since it

was not protected by an atmosphere its surface had been burned to an ashy color by the sun. The natural monument was wider at its base, thus offering enough shade for a number of men. He climbed the low incline that separated him from his goal. Once he had determined that it could offer them relative security, he would assemble the men here.

His next step was almost his last one. The ground suddenly cracked under him like an egg shell. His foot went through as he instinctively fell forward, but the unseen hollow beneath was deeper than he thought. A large piece of surface crust collapsed and he went with it into darkness. When he struck bottom, a shower of rocky debris rained down on him. The treacherous layer of crust had broken away, leaving a hole above him that was about 4 meters in width.

His spacesuit was apparently undamaged. With relief, he took in a deep breath of air. A few moments before, it had seemed to be getting stuffy and dry, but now he was sure he would not suffocate. When he tried to turn around, he found that his legs were stuck in a crevice. All he could do was turn his head. Above him he saw the brilliant outline of the opening which was about 2 meters overhead. Its edges were very uneven. Probably they would crumble away under him if he tried to climb out.

Carefully, Rhodan supported himself on his elbows, causing sand and rubble to slither off the front of his suit. It would take him a while to extricate himself from the crevice, but without help he would not be able to get out of the pit he had fallen into.

It would be safer to use his helmet radio and advise the men of his situation. The needle of rock was easy to find. If they hurried they could get to him in a matter of minutes. He could not suppress a bitter laugh. Everything had gone wrong with this operation. If a Laurin should happen to come to the edge of the hole now, he wouldn't have a chance of defending himself.

He let himself sink back in the crevice. "This is Rhodan speaking," he said calmly into his helmet mike. "About 100 meters from the entrance to the ramp is a tall sliver of rock. Everybody assemble there. I have fallen into a hole because the ground is brittle and undermined with cavities." He waited a moment but received no answer. "Hello out there!" he called. "This is Rhodan . . ."

The helmet speaker remained silent. His sense of uneasiness was increasing. What had happened? Had his radio been damaged by his fall, or were the others unable to answer? He tried again but without success. Of course there was still the possibility of contacting Pucky or Marshall by

means of telepathy.

Just then a shadow fell across his face. A figure darkened the opening of the cave. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was a Terran. He couldn't see the man's face yet because it was in shadow.

"Watch out!" warned Rhodan. "I don't want you to fall in here with me!"

The spacesuited figure straightened up, and for the first time Rhodan saw the face. The man was not a Terran. He was a member of an Akon subversive group that hoped to sabotage the galactic alliance. It was Fyrn!

"What's the matter with you?" asked the Akon. "Are you still alive down there?"

"Of course I am!" said Rhodan. "Do you think I'd be able to talk to you if I were dead?"

"Why don't you speak?" asked Fyrn impatiently.

Now he knew why he had been unable to contact his companions. His helmet radio had been partially damaged. He could only receive but he couldn't transmit. He raised an arm as a signal of his situation.

The Akon chuckled. "Could it be that your radio is not in order?" asked Fyrn.

Rhodan waved his arm in confirmation.

"Aha!" The other's voice seemed to carry a note of satisfaction. "You can hear me, but no one can hear *you*? Perhaps we can establish some signals between us, on the basis of a yes or no. Wave your arm once for yes and twice for no. Is that agreed?"

Rhodan wondered why Fyrn was being so elaborate about all this. Why didn't he simply call to the other men and bring them here?

"What's the matter?" shouted Fyrn in sudden anger. "Can you hear me?"

Rhodan waved his arm once.

"Very good!" replied the Akon in a whisper.

He drew something from his belt. When the light fell on it, Rhodan saw that it was an impulse beamer. Where had the Akon gotten the weapon? Somehow he must have obtained it during the outbreak from the factory.

"Fate often takes strange avenues," said Fyrn. "The misfortune that brought us here is responsible for giving me back my memory. Now I know that I'm an agent of an underground organization that is against the alliance and it's clear to me what that means." His body seemed to sway back and forth as a dark silhouette. "The alliance will collapse, Administrator, if you die . .

.”

Rhodan waited. It was difficult to see thru the mentality of an Akon.

“Only because you saved my life in the factory am I now able to extinguish yours,” explained Fyrn calmly. “Now that seems almost to be a kind of predestination or did you think that everything was a matter of chance? The long chain of events, Rhodan, beginning with my being unmasked by Berhaan and your rescuing intervention – surely you don’t think that such things happen by accident?”

Desperately, Rhodan sent out a mental call for help. This fanatic wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him without mercy because he hoped to aid his political group.

“It would be absurd to call me a murderer,” Fyrn continued. “I am merely carrying out an assignment that is of great importance to our race.”

Rhodan waved his arm at him twice. If he could delay the Akon long enough, Pucky or Tschubai might get here in time.

“You wish to say something?” asked Fyrn.

“Yes, signaled Rhodan.

Fyrn got down on his knees as if he had all the time in this world at his disposal. While he crouched up there, appearing as a slim, dark shadow, Rhodan could feel no hate for him.

“Any question would be senseless, Rhodan,” said Fyrn. “Of what use would an answer be if it only goes with you to your death?”

When he stood up again, it seemed to Rhodan that each of his movements took an eternity. Suddenly anything other than Fyrn seemed meaningless to him, even the Laurins and the alliance. He realized that even he was only a human being who at the last moment could only think of saving his life. This was a completely natural reaction, but the fact that he could recognize it objectively gave him a certain measure of control over his feelings. And beyond the problem of Fyrn all other things came alive again as if they had just now come into being.

Then the Akon raised his weapon . . .

5.

VALLEY OF THE LOST

As applied to the various spacefaring races of the galaxy the word "intelligence" was a very relative term which depended on one's particular environment. Each race developed its own kind of intelligence, which gave the word an abstract meaning in each special case. If one wished to determine how the intelligence of a Terran related to that of a Trox, one would have to go to the trouble of investigating the beginnings of intelligent stimulus and response in the development stages of each of the two races. Human intelligence had developed from a different set of reciprocal actions than that of a Trox. Therefore the two could not be compared with one another. There was simply no common point of reference whereby the intelligence of either race could be weighed against the other.

In order to free themselves from this difficulty, scientists used the concept of fundamental differences in racial mentalities. The truth was, however, that if a Trox wished to live among humans he would have to change very much if he were to learn or adjust to anything at all. But even then he would not approach mental parity if the human didn't meet him half-way. Between the two mentalities a kind of compromise had to be made. There was a sort of psychic sphere which both had to enter to mutually understand each other.

Only a race capable of entering into such a newly conceived "metasphere" had any chance at all of exerting a cosmo-political influence.

Although the Akons were humanoid in physical appearance, their mentality was no more similar to that of humans than that of a Trox. The example of the galactic alliance was proof that it was easier for human-like races to create such a metasphere than it was for the non-human races. But often it happened that an unbridgeable gulf would open or reveal itself between two races.

When Fyrn aimed the impulse weapon at Rhodan, both of them – Akon and human had left the plane of psychic or mental communication. They were at opposite extremes, neither one understanding the other.

Rhodan's life depended on whether or not the two of them would succeed in mutually creating the metasphere again at the last moment. However, the

gulf between them was too great.

*

Atlan reached the surface of the planet in a cloud of greenish vapor. It was only then that he could take time to concern himself about the other men as he saw them emerging one after the other from the escalator ramp. Whether or not they were safer up here from Laurin attacks was the question. He had given up trying to puzzle out the mystery of this superheated planet. The top priority now was to protect the men from their unseen enemy.

The mutants didn't require any guidance or advice. They were experienced enough to be self-sustaining in any situation, but it was a different matter in the case of the specialists and scientists. Such men were not accustomed to fight under these conditions. With the exception of Van Moders and Dr. Bryant, none of them had ever participated in a combat mission before.

John Marshall joined him suddenly. "The Laurins have followed us up the ramp," he reported. "They're not giving up."

"We're going to have to dig in somewhere," said Atlan. He looked around among the men, searching for Rhodan's yellow helmet insignia. "Where is Perry?" he asked.

Goratschin spoke up. "He was one of the first to get to the surface. Maybe he's looking for a suitable hiding place."

Marshall added: "The two teleporters are still down below. They're trying to hold off the Laurins as long as possible."

The red ball of the sun seemed to be sending its fiery beams right through Atlan's helmet filter. With narrowed eyes, he ran ahead of the men toward the dubious safety of the tortured open terrain. Once, when he turned to look back, he looked directly into the face of Lowry, one of the specialist technicians. Even thru the man's light filter, Atlan could see that he was gleaming with running sweat.

In the long run their spacesuits would not be able to withstand these extreme temperatures. The sun was as dangerous a foe as the Laurins – perhaps even more so. Even if they managed to hold off the Laurins, sooner or later they would become the victims of Nature herself.

Atlan shuddered. For generations he had fought on the side of the Terrans. Now when he had almost come to be one of them he would probably die with them.

Reginald Bell wearily ran a hand thru his stubbly hair and moved closer to the window of the air taxi, so that he could look down at the streets. It was the peak of the traffic hour and the numerous vehicles below presented a moving kaleidoscope of changing colors and shapes.

Then he merely stared outward at nothing, because he wasn't interested in the scenery. The barely audible humming of the rotors blended with the faint whistling of the wind as it swept over the cockpit. The pilot had his service cap tipped back on his head and was probably day-dreaming about the fleet of automatic taxis he would have in the future, just like many of his colleagues before him.

However, he suddenly turned to Bell with a polite question: "Sir – how come you are using a public taxi? You sure don't lack any transportation!"

Bell was forced to smile. The man had recognized him, so of course his curiosity was understandable. It was generally the custom for government officials or members of the fleet to use their own service cars or aircraft.

"I'm hiding," he admitted frankly. "I'm trying to find a peaceful spot where I can do some uninterrupted thinking for a change."

The pilot turned back to his controls. These words of Rhodan's 2nd-in-command bewildered him. What kind of a man was this Mr. Bell who openly discussed his problem with an ordinary taxi pilot? "Do you want to go somewhere in particular?" he asked hastily.

"Yes," answered Bell. "Land on the Arabian Roof Garden."

"You mean the little restaurant, sir?"

Bell nodded silently and continued to study his surroundings. As the pilot let the taxi drop down a little, Bell's thoughts returned to recent events. He had just come from a special meeting where Allan D. Mercant and the chief of Department III had also been present.

The gathered specialists had talked together for a long time, and the high point had undoubtedly been the speech of this Dr. Soames. The latter had suggested that they should search for Rhodan and his companions where they had presumably been lost: between the dimensions. For the realization of his plan he had spoken of a loosening of dimensional linkages. He declared that he could achieve this by means of an energy bomb, which he proposed to explode inside the giant transmitter on Arkon III.

Berhaan had meanwhile arrived in Terrania and was present at the meeting. When he heard this he had smirked rather sarcastically. In a few sentences

the Akon plucked the Terran's idea to pieces. He said that no energy in the world would suffice to drive a wedge into nothingness. The hyper dimensions were of course only theoretical concepts, and they could not be influenced because they were not even mathematically explorable. Moreover, Berhaan stubbornly refused to allow any further use of the transmitter until the fate of the vanished men had been determined. He also advised that any experiments with the transmitter that were without the approval of Akon would result in an immediate recall of all their scientists back to the Blue System.

It was an ultimatum, but it wasn't exactly stupid. Any further use of the transmitter could completely wipe out all traces of the trail that led to Perry Rhodan.

The voice of the pilot jolted Bell from his thoughts. "It's over there, sir! I'll land in the parking lot." The taxi changed course and headed toward a flat roof where a small neon sign was visible at one end. "It's a very pleasant restaurant, sir," said the pilot as he landed.

Bell thanked him, paid the fare, and got out. A warm wind blew against his face. At the entrance a tall man with dark eyes greeted him.

"Do you wish a special table, sir?" he inquired.

Bell pushed his stocky frame thru the doorway into the dimly-lighted place. At this early hour of the evening there were very few customers. "I'll seat myself," he answered. He turned to a small table and let himself sink into a cushioned chair.

The waiter was a special drawing card for the restaurant, being a 4-eyed Nevranian and a local personality.

"Hello, Keechie," Bell greeted him as he came to his table.

Keechie squinted his eyes ecstatically when he recognized his guest. His golden-brown pelt shimmered faintly under the indirect lighting. "How are you, my Mr. Bell?" he asked in a deep voice and a heavier accent.

"I could use a pickup," Bell told him.

Keechie regarded him with almost desperate concern. "My Mr. Bell have worry?" A typical Nevranian smile touched his oval face, expressing understanding and sympathy. "It have to do with my Mr. Rhodan?"

Bell forced a smile. "I sometimes think you're a mind-reader, Keechie," he said.

"All I have only to do is look on you, Mr. Bell," replied the Nevranian, "and then I know."

Bell readjusted himself on the cushioned chair. The burden of his responsibilities weighed heavily on him. Actually he shouldn't be here at all, but this was the only place where he could think in peace and decide what he should do next.

"Bring me something to drink," he said. "Something that won't make my head thick. I only want to relax."

"Something that fit your mood, my sir?" inquired Keechie gently. His eyes glowed like crystals.

"You might almost say I've lost something," said Bell in a low tone. "Would you understand that, old philosopher?"

"Nothing be lost, Mr. Bell, when continue to live in thoughts," Keechie reassured him knowingly. Then he drew in his claws and whisked away.

Bell sat there staring absently. Nor did he move when Keechie returned and placed a glass on the table in front of him.

*

"With a single shot," said Fyrn, "I could make history. What do you think would be the consequences of your death, Rhodan?" Suddenly he threw his weapon into the pit. "My principals would probably kill me for passing up this opportunity," he muttered. "But they may not ever hear about it if we don't get off this planet." He laughed almost inaudibly. "I've failed at being either a spy or an assassin!"

He seemed to be waiting for some reaction from Rhodan, but the Terran remained motionlessly where he was. "What do you think?" he asked, finally. "Was I too much of a coward to be able to shoot you, or was I curious about how you would get out of the present situation? You've saved my life twice now – once on Arkon III, then here on this hellish planet. But that's not the reason why I spared you. Maybe I'm also hoping that you'll find something definite here about the Posbis."

Rhodan had already resigned himself to the thought of dying. Now he tried to analyze the Akon's words in an attempt to unravel what lay behind them. This spy was a very strange man who for unknown reasons had acquired a split personality.

"Here come your men," commented Fyrn. "I'm going to call them over here now. Then it's up to you if I'm going to be arrested."

A few minutes later some of the other spacesuited figures gathered around the hole. Rhodan gestured frantically to warn them back from the

treacherous edges of the pit. Fyrn explained to Marshall and Atlan that Rhodan's helmet radio could only receive. Now as before, Perry was concerned about the missing teleporters.

Atlan explained. "Pucky and Ras are still keeping the Laurins busy. But they'll be able to get you out of there without any trouble."

Rhodan signaled his agreement with this suggestion, but without further ado, Atlan began to climb down into the pit.

"You look half buried alive," he said finally as he cautiously lowered himself beside his friend. After tinkering a while with Rhodan's helmet, he called to him again. "Now try speaking to me."

"Get me out of here," said Rhodan."

In a few words, Rhodan reported what had happened, but without mentioning Fyrn.

John Marshall bent down near the edge of the cave-in and pointed toward the underground factory. "It's time we got out of here," he said. "Over that base a Laurin spaceship is getting ready to land."

Atlan moved around Rhodan in a crouched position in order to support him under his shoulders. Rhodan pushed both legs against the rubble that had held him stuck in the fissure, and Atlan pulled him upward at the same time. By jerks he came free until he could stand up by himself.

Marshall and one of the specialists bent down by the hole and reached out their hands. Rhodan gripped them and jumped upward. In a few seconds the two men pulled him free. Then Atlan came out by the same method.

"We have to watch every step," Rhodan warned them. "The ground is treacherous."

When he turned to look toward the base, he saw the Laurin ship at an altitude of about 500 meters, getting ready to land. It had a teardrop shape in which the rounded end was evidently the bow. The vessel was not especially large.

"It seems to be heading for the canyon behind the ramp entrance," conjectured Van Moders.

"The distance is deceiving," said Rhodan. "Just now it must be at least half a kilometer from the factory entrances. I'd estimate that it will come down at the edge of the canyon but from here we still won't be able to see it."

"Do you think there are other ships in the canyon?" asked Marshall.

"I don't believe so. The Laurins must have prepared a landing field in a safer place where they wouldn't have to be afraid of the ground giving

away under them every time they came down.”

Van Moders looked thoughtfully at the strange ship as it glided slowly downward. “We ought to be able to capture one of their ships and use it to get out of here.”

“Don’t waste your brain power on pipe dreams,” Rhodan admonished. “In the first place we haven’t any weapons that would get us anywhere near that ship, and in the second place its controls would be alien to us.”

He was bothered by the fact that Moders’ wild suggestion wasn’t easily dismissed from his thoughts. Perhaps because of their desperate situation the most unrealistic ideas seemed feasible. But even when he saw the ship disappear behind the station he couldn’t get it out of his mind. Maybe there was another way to make use of the alien vessel.

Rhodan called the double-headed mutant to him. “Ivan, can you locate that ship mentally?”

The mutant straightened up his more than 6½-foot frame as if this would help him to see over the distant edge of the depression. Strangely the two heads on his broad shoulders didn’t appear to be abnormal at the moment. “That’s no problem for me, Chief,” declared one of the heads in a deep voice.

Rhodan compressed his lips reflectively. A short time ago he had been considering the possibility of attracting a patrol ship’s attention by means of a heavy explosion. Now the opportunity seemed to be at hand.

He gave the order. “Ivan, see if you can explode that ship. Use all of its carbon atoms in one big chain reaction.”

Goratschin’s other head cautioned him. “It will take half the canyon with it, sir. Hopefully that won’t cause the factory base to cave in . . .”

Atlan perceived that his Terran friend wasn’t giving this order just to destroy the enemy. “What do you have in mind, Perry?” he asked.

Rhodan tapped the micro-transceiver on his arm. “This thing doesn’t have enough range to reach any of our ships. But maybe a heavy explosion might get some attention.”

Suddenly the ground beyond the subterranean factory burst into the air in a jet-like blast of flames. A huge curtain of stone rubble, torn-up earth and other debris momentarily hung over the landscape before it fell back again. The ground shook and everywhere there were small cave-ins and crumbings as earth-crust formations collapsed.

Rhodan glanced at Goratschin who silently nodded both of his heads. The

Laurin ship had ceased to exist.

Atlan breathed a big sigh of relief. "The factory base didn't cave in," he observed.

But the blast had brought Pucky and Ras out of the place in a hurry. They appeared among the men and stared back toward the explosion.

Pucky quipped with mock innocence: "For a couple seconds there, Ras and I thought that Van Moders was stomping on the roof with his oversized clod-hoppers!"

"Very funny!" retorted the robotics expert sourly.

"It won't be long now before they renew their attack," Tschubai predicted. "Shortly before the explosion they realized we had been fooling them. Suddenly they started to ignore us – and Pucky picked up some thought impulses that indicated they were heading for the surface."

"The destruction of their ship won't make them any more peaceful," said Rhodan.

As he often did in these situations, he tried to place himself mentally in the shoes of the enemy commander. He asked himself what he would do in such a case. If there were other spaceships on this planet, the answer was fairly obvious. The ships would take off to chase down the "intruders," who would then be helplessly exposed to an attack from above.

Fortunately, however, this idea did not seem to have occurred to the Laurin leader as yet, or else he did not have any other ships at his disposal. Rhodan decided not to withdraw any farther from the Mechanica base than this, because in case of a spaceship attack they still had a chance of taking refuge under the surface.

The heat continued to increase, as the sun now stood at the zenith. Unlike Rhodan, Atlan and the mutants, the scientists suffered more from the effects of the high temperature because they were not accustomed to such extreme conditions. Rhodan had all heavy weapons transferred to the mutants and the other stronger men in the group. Their most valuable equipment was still in the underground factory where in all probability it had been taken over by the Invisibles as a prize of war.

Rhodan checked his micro-transmitter which had been regularly repeating the distress signal of the Solar Fleet. If any ship happened to be patrolling the vicinity of this system, it should respond to the call in a fairly short time. It was highly probable that. The explosion hadn't been strong enough to achieve its purpose. For that it would be necessary to blow up half the planet, or at least cause a heavy explosion in outer space.

“They seem to have discovered us,” said Marshall suddenly. “Their thought impulses are increasing – they’re coming our way pretty fast.”

“The chase is on again,” commented Rhodan.

Beyond the needle of rock the land fell away flatly, offering no visible protection against the attackers. In an opposite direction, where Goratschin had destroyed the ship, there were fissured hills and ravines where they would have a chance to take up some reasonably safe positions. Rhodan was perspiring profusely and the air in his suit was getting stuffy. Although he could keep his thirst pangs under control, he wondered how the scientists would stand up under this kind of punishment for several more hours.

Was this struggle against the Laurins totally futile? Were all their defensive efforts to end only in death? Even if Rhodan had been certain that there was no hope left, he would have encouraged the men not to give up. Suffocation or thirst would kill them otherwise, or a shot from the unknown weapons of the Laurins. There was no use to simply stand and wait for such an end.

“It would be best for us to separate,” said Rhodan. “We’ll make up two detachments and go back by different routes. Each group will be accompanied by a teleporter. Atlan, you take part of the men and try to head directly for the base. We’ll make a detour and try to reach the canyon where the ship exploded.”

Rhodan separated the commando team accordingly. Then he gave his group the order to move out. He and Atlan silently exchanged glances.

“It seems that nobody is going to answer our distress call,” said the Arkonide. “We’re on our own resources as before.”

Rhodan joined his men who were already going down the incline. “We’ll meet each other between the canyon and the entrances,” he called back.

“Just a moment, Perry,” said Atlan. “Let’s give this inhospitable planet a name. I suggest we call it Surprise, because that’s what we have to look out for here.”

“Agreed,” answered Rhodan.

He went slowly down the slope from the base of the towering rock. Fyrn was with his group and stayed close to Rhodan. After a while, when Atlan’s detachment could no longer be seen, the Akon spoke to him.

“One of the men with the Arkonide was ready to collapse,” he said.

“I noticed that,” Rhodan replied calmly.

Fyrn came to a stop. “I had a feeling that he wouldn’t get very far. We

should have helped him.”

“How?”

“Well, you should have ordered a longer rest period, Rhodan.

It might have given him new strength to go on.” It appeared to Rhodan that the outer temperature had increased even more. As he continued onward, he said, “The Laurins aren’t giving us any time for rest periods. Besides, it’s dangerous for a man to stop too long when he’s in that condition. He might not ever get on his feet again.”

Fyrn sounded sarcastic. “You’re a pretty hard man, aren’t you?”

“You can think what you want to,” retorted Rhodan. “I’m leading this mission. If you don’t like the measures I’m taking, then you’ll have to get along by yourself.”

Fyrn was lost in thought as he looked across the blazing terrain. “I believe you’ll never give up,” he mused. “You’d push on thru the tortures of hell to the last second, even if all hope was gone.”

“That’s the way it is,” said Rhodan.

Fyrn stumbled over a boulder and for a brief moment he had to hold on to Rhodan. He laughed bitterly. “I wish Bosaar could see me now!”

“Who is Bosaar?” asked John Marshall, who was walking ahead of Rhodan.

“He’s the leader of the underground movement,” Fyrn explained. “At least I think he is, although old Brosanor also has a lot of influence.”

Tschubai had evidently not been too pleased by this conversation between Fyrn and Rhodan. “You seem to be pretty frivolous about revealing the names of your political friends,” he commented sullenly.

Fyrn smiled. “And why not? After all, what can you do with such information now? By the time our bones are bleaching here in this oven, probably Bosaar will have worked out some new plans, anyway.” He fell silent, but when Rhodan figured the Akon had grown weary of talking, he spoke again. “You know, Rhodan, here on this world this whole affair takes on a new look. Bosaar and the Blue System are infinitely remote now. You could almost think that my former friends were something out of a dream. Our situation here is too final for me to still be thinking about the alliance or anything else.”

Marshall’s tone was typically dry when he suggested: “Your situation is going to be a lot more final if you don’t get moving faster. We’re being followed.”

Fyrn hurried to catch up to the others while Tschubai made a short teleport jump ahead to look around. The African was assigned to reconnoitering for suitable protective cover, since Rhodan assumed that their march would be interrupted more than once by the Laurins.

Rhodan glanced at his arm transmitter doubtfully. Here was one more proof that no power would ever be able to control the entire galaxy. The number of ships for such a task was unimaginable.

He couldn't conceive of any living creature who would be able to consider his own galaxy as being small. For the ancient seafarers of Earth the oceans had been regarded as almost unbridgeable gulfs between various parts of the world, but to modern spacemen such distances were hardly worth mentioning. In some future time would galactic distances also shrink to the same extent? How big did man have to be to feel that the Milky Way was small?

Intuitively, Rhodan suspected that more was involved than merely a fleet of incredibly swift spaceships. It was necessary for evolution itself to make a transition. Would mankind ever reach such a state?

The answer to all these questions depended upon what the immediate future held for the Terrans. If they became entangled in a decisive war with the Posbis, or some other race powerful enough to threaten ultimate disaster, then there would be little hope of ever finding the answer.

Rhodan was far too much of a realist to harbor any illusions concerning the chances for humanity. Right here on this small world that Atlan had dubbed Surprise, an interim stroke of decision could occur. In case they should die here, humankind would never learn anything about the descendants of Mechanica. However, should they manage to survive they would be able to collect some data that might help them to successfully resist the biotronic robots.

Cautiously, Rhodan placed his feet on a narrow ledge they had to traverse. Each step could result in death. The rays of Outside continued to send their undiminished brilliance thru the void to this moon-sized world, where they seared the desolate landscape without mercy. Rhodan risked taking a look at the red disc, which resembled a giant eye more than it did a star. It seemed almost as if it had hardly changed its position, which was more hallucination than fact.

The closer they came to the canyon the rougher the landscape became. They finally reached a long valley.

Tschubai had just returned from a reconnaissance jump. "The valley is free

of Laurins,” he reported. “Apparently only a few of them are tracking us just to see what we’re up to.”

“Is there a shorter way to the canyon,” asked Rhodan, “other than thru the valley?”

“We could go over this chain of hills. They don’t look too bad from here,” cautioned Tschubai, “but they could be plenty tricky.”

Rhodan knew that some of the men would not be able to survive any extensive climbing. He raised an arm to indicate their present direction. “We’ll take the valley route,” he decided.

Other than themselves and the Laurins, the heat-gutted land was lifeless. Their movements became markedly slower. Some of the men could only drag themselves along with a great effort.

When they had traversed about a third of the new stretch, Rhodan heard a faint groan from somewhere, followed by a rattling sound. He knew only too well what it meant. He stopped and looked back. One of the men had dropped from fatigue. He glanced upward at the low cliffs that enclosed the valley. Were the Laurins merely waiting for them to become defenseless before making their attack?

“Help him up,” he told Marshall calmly.

The telepath gripped the fallen man under his arms. The man staggered to his feet. When Rhodan approached him he blinked in some bewilderment, his face set in an expression of complete resignation. Rhodan raised his light filter to see who he was, and the sunlight struck his eyes like flaming arrows.

“What’s wrong with you, Perfid?” he asked the scientist.

Perfid was an older man who had been one of Van Moders’ teachers. He seemed to be irritated. Marshall released his grip on him and he managed to stand by himself

“I can’t go on any farther,” he said.

Rhodan laughed derisively. “They warned me back on earth that you’d be nothing but trouble,” he declared. When Perfid took a step towards him, he continued coldly. “You’re just too old for such missions.”

The scientist swung at him but he ducked the blow. Perfid was yelling at him. “I’ll show you that I can take as much as you can!”

Rhodan only laughed and turned his back to him. When they continued onward, Perfid moved right along behind him. Rhodan noted that Fyrn had a sarcastic smirk on his face. He probably figured that this psychological

trick wouldn't serve to sustain Perfid more than another 2 hours at the most. Nor was he wrong. A man's will, no matter how powerful, could not drive his physical body beyond its own limitations. It wouldn't be long before all of them would be falling to the barren earth, driven half mad by heat and thirst.

A few minutes later they came upon a lake of molten lead. It was only about 20 meters long but it stretched laterally across the valley floor. On each side rose rugged cliffs, blocking them off. It was impossible to skirt the deadly obstruction.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Tschubai calmly. "I must have taken this stretch for sand when I scouted the area."

"We have to go back," said Rhodan. "There's nothing else we can do."

"That won't work," cautioned Marshall. "The Laurins have come into the valley behind us and they've blocked off our retreat."

Rhodan suppressed an unruly impulse to simply sink to the ground. They had wandered into a trap. The legacy of *Mechanica* which concealed so many answers to the riddle was now safe in the hands of the Invisibles. Fyrn had been right. What good was an answer that one could only take with him into death?

For a moment, Rhodan closed his eyes. Even the cell activator on his chest could not save him now. When he raised his eyelids he looked directly at the ghostly-calm metallic lake, which lay there like a gray carpet.

It was the moment of triumph for the Laurins. Their only obstacle to final victory was two small detachments of half-dead Terrans. They didn't even have to pursue their attack.

All they had to do was wait.

6.

THE SHIP OF DOOM

At first it looked as if the Laurins might be trying to block their way back to the underground base, but then Atlan learned that the Invisibles had grouped themselves behind him.

The Emperor sought to evaluate the situation as objectively as possible. Actually all they were doing was running from the enemy in the desperate hope that they would be rescued by a Terran spaceship. The Arkonide wondered if it might be possible to negotiate with the opposition. So far the Invisibles had always attacked without warning. Either they were extremely hostile by nature or they saw in the Terrans a threat that had to be eliminated at all costs.

Nobody had to tell Atlan that the men coming behind him in an even file were as exhausted as he was. The degree of their exhaustion also varied widely. His greatest concern was for Pucky. Although the mousebeaver wasn't complaining, his very silence indicated that the mutant was struggling against severe difficulties. His constant survey jumps were costing Pucky all the reserves of strength that his small body contained.

Atlan raised an arm and the group halted. The mousebeaver waddled closer to him and sat down on a boulder.

"We're halfway there," said Pucky. "It seems that we were making better time before than we are now."

"And with good reason," Atlan told him. "We weren't being so closely hounded by the Laurins, and we were lighter on our feet."

Pucky ventured a weary grin. "Do you think they know what we're up to?"

Atlan pointed to the entrances of the base. "At least they'll find out when we reach there. I don't think they'll take kindly to our attempts to reenter the place."

Pucky suddenly got up from his uncomfortable seat. "We have to get going," he chirped. "They're catching up."

But it really seemed as if the Laurins were deliberately holding back and lying in wait to see what the Terrans' next move would be. Atlan noted that it was costing the men a great effort to get under way again. He waited until the last of them had gotten started before he moved on.

Although darkness could put them at a worse disadvantage with the Laurins, he wished it were night – the cool night that would remove this merciless fire from the sky. Suns were normally the givers of life, but this red monster had become a relentless killer. Pucky suddenly gave an alarm. “Now they’re starting to move!” he warned.

It startled Atlan. He jerked his weapon off his shoulder somewhat irritably. “What’s the matter with you?” he snapped back at him, although he was immediately sorry for the sharpness of his tone.

However, at present it didn’t seem to make much difference to Pucky whether anyone was polite to him or not. “They’ve seen that we plan to enter the base,” he reported excitedly. “They’re not staying behind us now.”

“What does that mean?” asked Dr. Bryant.

“They’re trying to cut us off,” answered Wuriu Sengu.

“Let’s hope they don’t attack us now,” said Atlan.

“That all depends,” retorted Pucky. “If we don’t make any further attempts to reach the entrances, they’ll leave us alone – which means they’ll hang around until we’re barbecued.”

Dr. Bryant was seized by an attack of coughing. When he could catch his breath again, he asked, “What will happen if we just keep moving?”

Atlan answered him wearily. “That’s something you’ll know in just a few minutes, Doc . . .”

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Rhodan had never been the type to shirk responsibility when he was caught in a blind alley. Of course the most valid leader often relegated some responsibility to his subordinates to a certain degree, yet he did not hesitate to make arbitrary decisions, even if he might be subject to criticism.

However, no man present would have been capable of uttering a word of criticism. Most of them were clearly demonstrating the limitations of the human brain’s capacity to think clearly under conditions of complete physical exhaustion. Many had already given up and were sitting around on rocks, staring blankly, either waiting for orders or for the Laurins to strike their final blow.

Outside of Tschubai and Marshall, Rhodan was the only one still on his feet. He turned to the teleporter. “How do you feel, Ras?” he asked.

The mutant tried to smile but it was only an imitation. His dark features

were sunken and his face seemed gray. “Don’t ask me how I am, Chief,” he answered. “Just tell me what you have in mind.”

“All right, Ras. Do you think you’re strong enough to take us across that lake of molten lead?”

Tschubai’s face reflected his consternation. “That would take at least 10 or 11 jumps with a triple load, sir,” he muttered. “I can’t guarantee I’ll make it with all of them . . . and every couple of jumps I’ll have to take a rest.”

Rhodan gazed silently at the grayish lake, which looked like a solid mass.

“The Laurins are gradually moving in closer,” said Marshall.

Goratschin sat hunched on a large rock. “Tell me where those freaks are,” he said, “so that I can slow them up a little.”

While Marshall gave the “detonator” the necessary instructions, Rhodan turned again to Tschubai. “Give it a try, Ras. Take Perfid and Van Moders with you first.”

The teleporter dematerialized with the two scientists and reappeared with them almost simultaneously on the other side. Perfid sank to the ground but Van Moders waved his arms. Then Tschubai jumped back to pick up two more men.

The Laurins had moved in closer and now opened fire. Rhodan crouched behind a brittle looking boulder and went into defensive action along with Marshall and Goratschin. Within a matter of seconds the two-headed mutant succeeded in eliminating three of the enemy.

When Tschubai returned from his fourth teleport trip, he sank down exhausted next to Rhodan, who watched him worriedly. Ras smiled weakly. “Just need a minute,” he said apologetically. He drew his weapon to also join in the shooting but Rhodan shook his head emphatically.

“Take a breather!” he ordered.

Tschubai sank back. Fyrn came crawling over and brought a disintegrator with him, taking up a position next to Rhodan. Without a word the Akon began to fire at the attackers. The shadowy outline of a Laurin appeared close in front of them, but under their concentrated fire the weird creature died before he could kill any of the Terrans.

Rhodan felt sharply alert again. The Laurins had finally realized that the two-headed mutant was their most dangerous enemy. They were making a concerted effort to work toward his position. Rhodan nudged Fyrn several times until the Akon understood what was happening. Goratschin lay behind a rock that rose up several meters farther on. The Laurins started to

systematically destroy the rock itself.

“Ras!” he whispered. “You have to haul Ivan out of there!”

Tschubai rolled over onto his stomach and observed the situation. Fyrn, Rhodan and Marshall kept an uninterrupted fire against the enemy, who still continued to approach Goratschin. Tschubai vanished, only to reappear instantly beside the two-headed giant. He signaled back to them. The furious attack of the Laurins achieved its first objective. The rock the two mutants were lying behind suddenly shattered and split open. In the same moment, Tschubai teleported with Goratschin and the Laurins charged into emptiness.

“Now it’s our turn,” remarked Fyrn indifferently.

While Tschubai continued to bring the other men to the other side of the metallic lake, the Laurins besieged the miniature stronghold from which Rhodan, Marshall and Fyrn were offering a stubborn resistance. Finally the teleporter appeared beside Rhodan. He was panting heavily as he threw himself flat on the ground.

“Are you wounded, Ras?” asked Marshall anxiously.

“No,” wheezed Ras, “but just now I’m bushed. I need a few minutes to get my second wind.”

Marshall and Rhodan exchanged significant glances. The Laurins were opening an all-out attack. They seemed to have recognized the weakness of their opposition and considered the present moment the best time to strike. The Akon agent kept firing like an automaton. The man’s tenacity was amazing. Rhodan and the telepath also resumed their defensive firing. It was a ghostly battle because they usually only saw an enemy when they chanced to make a direct hit.

Tschubai sighed in frustration. Their most powerful weapon, Goratschin, was now on the other side of the lake. Of course he continued his attacks from where he was, but not with the same effect as when he was practically on top of the Invisibles.

Rhodan was aware that one of them would have to remain alone here when the teleporter made his next jump. And he chose to be the last one.

Just then the rock in front of them burst asunder. They were defenselessly exposed to the enemy.

*

It was exactly what Atlan had expected. As soon as the Laurins were sure

that the Terrans' objective was the underground factory, they concentrated their fighting forces in the path of the spacefarers. All further advances of the small group ran into fierce resistance.

Dr. Bryant, moving beside Atlan, was streaming with sweat. "We have to fight for every yard," he said determinedly.

They had left three dead scientists behind them. Two of them had been victims of a direct attack, while the third man had died of exhaustion. Nevertheless, they succeeded in pushing the Laurins back farther toward the base.

Sengu, who had been putting up a furious fight, was securing the right flank together with Hamilton. The Invisibles kept trying to drive a wedge thru the determined group from that direction.

Pucky returned from a reconnaissance jump and materialized near Atlan. It was plain to see that his eyes were red rimmed, and the parts of his pelt that were visible looked half-plucked out. The mousebeaver reported weakly: "They're bunching together at the entrances so they can bring everything they've got against us." He paused before continuing. "I wasn't able to fool with them telekinetically. I needed all my strength just to teleport back.

For some yet unknown reason the Laurins were determined to keep the Terrans out of the base at all costs. Just how determined they were became evident only a few seconds after Pucky's return. A major-class spaceship rose up from behind the hills that concealed the canyon.

For the first time since they had arrived on Surprise, Atlan experienced fear. He knew what the Laurins had in mind. The big teardrop-shaped vessel would seek an altitude that was out of their range, and from there it would open a destructive fire against them. His helplessness almost made him despair. There was a distinct difference between being able to defend yourself and just helplessly waiting for death.

"What should we do now, Imperator?" shouted Sengu. "They've sent up one of their ships!"

The vessel rapidly gained altitude as they all watched it in silence. The pressure of the Laurins in front of them began to lessen. By all appearances they were beating a hasty retreat in order not to be attacked by their own ship.

"Pucky!" called Atlan softly.

There was no answer. Atlan turned about swiftly but the mousebeaver had vanished. The Arkonide suspected that Pucky was planning an act of desperation.

The 150-man crew of the light cruiser *MONTANA* was not in a very happy mood. This was partially due to the fact that their ship was on patrol duty, which was somewhat monotonous, but also Solar Intelligence had informed them a few hours ago about the disappearance of Perry Rhodan and his companions.

Maj. Lee Endicott was the commander of the *MONTANA*, a State class cruiser measuring 100 meters in diameter. He had received instructions to report any unusual activity immediately, even if the observation seemed to be unimportant to him. This order had come directly from headquarters in Terrania. In Endicott's opinion, the interpretation of such an instruction was open-ended; it meant that they should concern themselves almost with anything that happened, even if it only had the faintest connection with their assignment. It was a distinct change from their original task, which had been simply to watch for suspicious ship movements along the edge of the galaxy. Terra wanted to secure itself against any sudden attacks from that direction.

The *MONTANA* had not had occasion to turn on its linear propulsion system. It was merely cruising along its lonely course at a reduced velocity. At about the same time that the Laurins' giant spaceship emerged from the canyon on Surprise, Maj. Endicott entered the control central. His first officer, Wayne Cider, got up from his seat and nodded to him.

"All clear, sir," he reported. "The ship is ready for the change of watch."

Endicott had spent the past few hours in his cabin pondering over Rhodan's disappearance. He had admitted to himself that the loss of the First Administrator would be a tremendous set-back for humanity. Rhodan simply could not be lost.

"Very well, Captain," he said to Cider. "You may retire to your cabin."

"This part of space is completely quiet," the first officer commented. "It's my guess that we won't find a trace of anything here." But his face revealed that he would be glad to be wrong about it.

Cider left the control central while the major took over the pilot's seat. The panoramic observation screen glittered with stars that were still visible along the edge of the Milky Way. In addition to himself there were 12 other crew members in the control central. Since the *MONTANA* was patrolling the Galactic Rim, all combat posts were fully manned.

Endicott leaned way back in his chair and took a deep breath. At present

the gleaming splendor of the starry firmaments left him somehow uninspired.

Suddenly, Cleaver called to him from his sensor-scanner console. "I have an energy reading in sector 43, sir!"

Endicott spun his seat around and leapt to his feet. Cleaver was bent over close to his instruments. His pale face contrasted sharply with the pastel green of his uniform, giving him a distinguished appearance.

When Endicott came up behind him, his finger groped rather than pointed to a panel marker. "But – that isn't –" he almost stammered.

Endicott looked at the panel impatiently. "What's the matter, Lieutenant?" he asked. "Can't you figure it out?"

"Sir, the energy burst did not originate inside the galaxy!"

"What's the location of sector 43?" asked Endicott, although he knew the answer.

"It's outside of our area," said Cleaver. "Sir, it has to be the Outside System!"

Endicott remembered that his instructions were to report any occurrence, no matter how remote or unimportant it might seem to be. In a few steps he reached the communications room which was adjacent to the control central. Wolfe, the 2nd com officer, looked up at him expectantly.

"Give me a hypercom channel to Terrania," he ordered. "Use crypto number 320-B."

Wolfe pulled himself together and hurried to comply. Endicott pressed his hands nervously together, which was a sure sign of his inner tension. Wolfe continued at his console, confidently making expert adjustments. Endicott waited resignedly for the connection to be established thru a long chain of relay stations.

At last Wolfe announced: "It's ready, sir." He made room for Endicott, who leaned close to the panel microphone.

"This is light cruiser *MONTANA* in zone 347 red, C-12," he announced. He repeated this three times until he received a confirmation signal.

Wolfe switched over and they heard a calm voice in the speaker: "Headquarters, Solar Intelligence, Department 10."

In as few words as possible, Endicott started to explain what had happened, but he was interrupted in the middle of it.

"Wait, Major," said the voice. "I'll connect you with the Chief."

Within a few minutes a concerned masculine voice was heard: "This is Mercant. What's happened, Major Endicott?"

"Sir, we have registered a strong burst of energy in the vicinity of Outside," reported Endicott.

"Do you think it's possible that the sun, Outside, could be the cause of it?" asked Mercant.

"No, sir – it did not come directly from that star."

Mercant seemed to be considering this for a moment. Then he said: "The fleet unit closest to your position consists of 3 battleships and 4 heavy cruisers. I'll order that contingent to set a direct course for Outside, using linear drive. Meanwhile, a larger force will depart from Terra to back up the 7 advance ships."

Endicott asked hopefully, "Do you think we're onto something, sir?"

"That energy burst can mean anything," replied Mercant, "but we can't overlook a single possibility. Major, get your ship under way immediately and set course for Outside. Try to find out what's going on out there. Report immediately to the formation that will be following you and of course also to myself."

"Good, sir," confirmed Endicott.

"Wait!" called Mercant. "If it turns out that we're dealing with alien ships, I don't want you to take any chances, The *MONTANA*'s task will be purely to observe. Over . . ."

"Over and out, sir," said Endicott, and he rushed out of the com room before Wolfe could say a word.

Meanwhile, Cider had returned to the control central. He looked excitedly at the major as the latter took over the flight controls and cut in the converters to full power. The *MONTANA* began to accelerate.

Endicott finally looked up at the panob screen. "We're setting a course for Outside," he announced.

CONTACT!

Rhodan did not wait for the Laurins to open fire first. In three jumps he reached new cover behind an outjutting rock. Tschubai had dematerialized immediately, taking Marshall with him. Rhodan risked taking a glance at the far side of the molten lake. For the time being, Marshall was safe, but he knew that the teleporter must be at the end of his strength.

Then he looked at Fyrn who was kneeling behind the shattered rock and firing at the attacking Laurins. "Fyrn!" shouted Rhodan. "You have to come away from there!"

The Akon let out a fiendish laugh. He was struck twice but his defense screen held. There was nothing left for Rhodan to do but also join in the shooting. The spy was hit again. He was knocked to one side but kept on firing from a prone position.

Goratschin caused one of the Laurins to explode, but the rest had all pressed forward into close proximity to the two men. Rhodan noted that all heavy weapons on the other side of the lake were in action.

Then came Pucky out of nowhere, landing next to Rhodan. He leaned against the rock while gasping for breath.

"They've sent up a giant spaceship," he reported. "They plan to attack us from above!"

Rhodan felt a sense of deep resignation come over him. The Invisibles had finally figured out a way of swiftly annihilating their enemy without any risk. He glanced across at the Akon who was still firing. It seemed that the charging assault of the Laurins was easing up. Which was not surprising because the enemy knew now that their ship would take care of the situation.

Pucky grasped Rhodan's arm. "We have to get to Goratschin!" he blurted out. "Maybe Ivan can do something!"

Rhodan pointed to the Akon. "Take him first," he ordered.

Pucky glared at him in desperation, but he obeyed without a word. He appeared briefly beside Fyrn, and without listening to his protests he teleported with him. Seconds later he was back. Rhodan fired a parting shot over the rock, and then he gripped Pucky's shoulder firmly. The

mousebeaver completed a second jump to the other side of the lake.

Rhodan turned swiftly to the two-headed mutant. "The Laurins have launched a large spaceship, Ivan. Do you think you can damage it before it brings us under fire?"

"There it is!" shrilled Pucky. "There it is!"

They saw the ship rise over the shoulder of the hills and gain altitude. Rhodan worried about Atlan's group, hoping that the vessel had not yet attacked them.

Goratschin presented a picture of extreme concentration. However, Rhodan doubted that the severely exhausted mutant could still activate sufficient paranormal power to seriously damage the ship. None of the men spoke. They could only look back and forth from the "detonator" to the teardrop-shaped vessel. By now it was useless to think of taking flight in any direction. The ship changed its course, and Rhodan realized at once that it was heading toward Atlan's group.

Then something exploded at the stern of the ship. Goratschin seemed to stagger. Fyrn moved to help him but Rhodan held him back. A second explosion knocked the ship off its course. It began to go into a spin and slanted steeply toward the ground. But their cry of triumph was cut short when the vessel righted itself and rose on an even course again. Evidently it was intent upon reaching outer space.

The thought entered Rhodan's mind that the size of the ship would provide a mighty explosion. He made a fast decision. "Pucky! Ras!" he called out. "Try to make a teleport jump with Goratschin and bring him close to the ship! Ivan, I need an explosion that will rattle half the Milky Way!"

"I understand, sir," confirmed Goratschin.

The two teleporters took the "detonator" between them. The ship was already out of sight.

"Hurry!" Rhodan urged them.

The three mutants vanished. The Akon's words came back to Rhodan then and he reviewed them in his mind: "You'd push on thru the tortures of hell to the last second, even if all hope was gone."

At the moment they could do nothing but wait for the mutants to return. More than 30000 light years removed from their original goal, the men were crouching here between the heat-seared rocks, suffering from thirst and half dead from exhaustion.

The ship was 10 kms away. The three mutants hovered in empty space. Within seconds of their materialization here, Goratschin resumed the destructive work he had started. He concentrated on specific parts of the ship, since it was impossible for him to destroy it in its total mass. Everything depended on whether or not he could disable the engines or other vital sections.

“Ready!” he announced.

While the mutants sprang back to the oven world, the ship glided onward as if nothing had happened. But then it paused in its flight and began to drop. With an increasing velocity, it fell back toward the surface of Surprise.

*

Before the mutants returned, Pierre Perfid succumbed to exhaustion. Van Moders tried in vain to give his old teacher relief. Finally he gave up and laid him on a flat rock. Silently, he sat down beside him.

Rhodan observed the lowering sun. No one could relieve him of the responsibility for this man’s death. He himself had planned the project that had led them into this inferno. Although he bore no guilt for the failure of the transmitter, he felt the moral burden of his authority. He should have considered that Perfid was an old man. It had been a mistake to give in to Van Moders’ insistence and to approve Perfid’s participation in the mission.

As the responsible leader he must always consider that something might go wrong. That was why all uncertain factors had to be discovered before the start of an operation and eliminated. If he had followed this rule, Perfid would still be alive.

The return of the three mutants gave Rhodan a momentary reprieve from his gloomy thoughts. However, at first he believed that Goratschin’s mission had failed.

“I think I set off three explosions,” said the Russian mutant. “It all depends on what parts of the ship were damaged.”

“There!” shouted Van Moders.

Without any apparent retropulsion, the great Laurin spaceship hurtled toward the surface of Surprise. At first it was only a dark, formless shadow sweeping across the sky. Rhodan hoped that it would not crash too close to their position. Involuntarily he held his breath. The vessel’s trajectory was

not vertical. It slanted downward at a steep angle. As soundless as a phantom, it darted away over the valley. If Surprise had possessed an atmosphere it would have been shaken by the compression. But everything transpired in complete silence.

The ship finally crashed with such a powerful detonation that everyone thought the small planet must be shaken to its foundations. The ground rumbled and started to sway. Nearby a cliff collapsed in a small avalanche. The molten lake began to boil as subterranean gas veins ruptured and released their pressures to the surface. Clouds of dust hung weightlessly over the shaken landscape.

Now the score was even. Neither they nor the Laurins had any security.

“Do you think that explosion was strong enough, sir?” asked Goratschin.

Rhodan turned on his arm-transceiver again, and the distress signal started to be transmitted at regular intervals. “I hope so,” he answered.

The explosion that finally destroyed the spaceship was the same burst of energy that had been registered by the *MONTANA* and reported to the headquarters of Solar Intelligence in Terrania.

*

Maj. Lee Endicott stared incredulously at the panob screen and then turned to Wolfe. “Are you absolutely sure that the signals are coming from this small planet, in such close proximity to Outside?” he asked.

The 2nd com officer leaned back in his chair. “Absolutely sure,” he replied.

Endicott shook his head. It was inconceivable. How could anybody be alive on this sun-baked planet? He tried not to dwell on the possibility that those who had sent out the distress call were already dead, while their transmitter was continuing to function automatically.

“Send a report immediately to headquarters,” he ordered. “But above all, try to establish contact with whoever’s down there on that moon-sized planet.”

When Wolfe disappeared into the com room, Endicott turned to his first officer. “When will the first fleet group get here?”

Cider glanced at the chronometer. “If the coordinates they gave us are correct, they should be here in about one hour.”

One hour! Endicott compressed his lips. A lot could happen in that length of time. In one hour, many men could die. Important men like Atlan, John Marshall, Van Moders . . .

And a man like Perry Rhodan!

*

In no more than 2 hours, Outside would sink behind the horizon. The cliff shadows had grown longer but the heat had not abated significantly.

Since their large spaceship had been destroyed, the Laurins had ceased their attacks. Apparently the earthshaking explosion had broken their fighting spirit.

In view of the poor condition of the scientists, Rhodan had decided not to continue their march thru the valley. Atlan reported over his helmet radio that the factory base had not suffered any visible damage as a result of the explosion. The Arkonide had assembled his men near the entrances but had not pressed farther because the Laurins had taken up a defensive position before the openings.

Surprise had become a silent world – a world of death. Rhodan was sure that most of the men would not live to see the next morning. But even for those who were strong enough to hold out that long there was no chance of them surviving another day.

In spite of his exhaustion, Rhodan's mental processes continued to function with amazing clarity. He took time to ponder over the connection there doubtlessly had to be between the Laurins, the extinct beings of Mechanica, and the Posbis.

There was obviously bitter enmity between the Laurins and the biopositronic robots. For some reason these widely different races were engaged in a merciless conflict with one another. If this altercation were of any advantage at all to Terra, it was merely that it prevented the Posbis and Laurins from concentrating on the Solar Imperium. But to Rhodan, Surprise was a visible proof that the Invisibles were determined to gain a foothold in the galaxy at all costs. The only question was, what was their major interest – the Posbis or the Milky Way?

Rhodan was so immersed in his thoughts that his arm-transceiver buzzed twice before he noticed it. The radio call was not even in code. The message merely stated that the light cruiser *MONTANA* had entered the Outside System and had picked up their distress signal.

"We have contact!" he shouted happily.

The men's state of lethargy vanished as they got up and surrounded Rhodan, who was working his transceiver.

“It’s the light cruiser *MONTANA*,” he reported excitedly. “They’ve received our signal!”

The men broke out with shouts of triumph. Rhodan signaled to Pucky who knew that he wanted Atlan to be informed about it. The mousebeaver teleported without a word.

Rhodan confirmed his reception of the message. Then he gave a short report to Maj. Endicott and informed the commander of their situation. He agreed with Mercant’s instructions and repeated the order. The *MONTANA* was to remain where it was until the Terran fighter ships arrived. Rhodan could well imagine how hard this must be for the major. It was arranged, however, that contact with the Montano would be kept open so that they could immediately report any hostile move by the Laurins.

After relating the most important happenings to Endicott, Rhodan turned to the assembled scientists, specialists and mutants. “It appears that our resistance against the Laurins is going to pay off, after all. We don’t know exactly what force caused us to be diverted to this planet. Van Moders believes that the *Mechanica* transmitter here created some kind of interference with the *Akon* transmitter. But let’s suppose that his theory is correct. Since the Laurins had labored to put these subterranean installations back into operation, our sudden appearance here was very unwelcome. However, they couldn’t know that they had given us an opportunity to trace down the mystery of the *Posbis*. I’m fully convinced that we’re going to discover some valuable research material here on *Surprise* particularly inside the base. The legacy of a long-vanished race came close to being our doom, but now it can become an effective weapon against the bio-robots. Of course we must not underestimate the threat of the Laurins. That’s why we’re not taking the chance of having Endicott land here prematurely.”

Rhodan paused to catch his breath for a moment. The men were overly fatigued, yet they gave him their full attention. Finally, he continued.

“The Invisibles will be taken by surprise when our ships suddenly show up here. I hope we succeed in driving them away. After that, we can pursue our investigations without interference. But before all that, the first thing we’re going to do is to go on shipboard and take care of ourselves. We’re going to have some cool refreshments and then get some sleep. So whatever happens, let’s not give up when we’re so close to being rescued.”

To his listeners, Rhodan’s words came as a reprieve and a promise of hope. By now the sun had reached the horizon and the intensity of its rays began to wane.

There was only one among them who did not share their enthusiasm. This was the Akon agent, Fyrn. Rhodan noted that the spy had detached himself from the others. He signaled to Marshall to be telepathically on the alert before he went over to the Akon. Fyrn looked at him in silence.

“One would almost think you weren’t too happy about the pending arrival of a fleet task force,” said Rhodan. “What’s depressing you, Fyrn?”

The Akon’s eyes seemed to gleam behind his light filter, but perhaps it was a reflection of the lowering sun. “All of you have gotten a whole new lease on life,” he answered. “You’ll be returning to freedom, but that won’t be for me. After we get back, Berhaan will never rest until he has me in his grasp. Well, since I know what I was assigned to do and failed to do, I know my present status in the organization. There won’t be any mercy given.” He laughed bitterly. “Do you really think I have a future to be happy about?”

Rhodan remained silent for a moment. He knew that the Akon was far too sensitive not to see thru any off hand promises immediately. Finally he asked, “What do you think about space travel, Fyrn?”

“That all depends,” replied the other.

Rhodan looked at him reflectively. “You know it’s quite possible that you lost your life here on Surprise while fighting the Laurins. Berhaan will soon have forgotten you.” Rhodan smiled. “Duty on board a Terran research ship is strenuous but interesting. I believe you’d like it on board such a ship.”

“I’m a born spaceman,” said Fyrn with a grin.

Rhodan observed him speculatively. “Of course,” he agreed. “One can tell by looking at you.”

Rhodan turned back to the other men who were engaged in a lively discussion. All their fatigue seemed to have been forgotten. Pucky returned from Atlan’s group to report that the imminent arrival of the warships had also helped them to forget their exertions.

He seemed to have regained his bent for humorous ribbing again, and he picked out Van Moders for his target. “Mister Moders, you’d better hurry up and have a new theory ready before the ships get here. They’ll be expecting that.”

Van Moders stared in amazement at the mousebeaver. The little imp had addressed him as “Mister,” which was an almost unbelievable occurrence. However, before he could think of a suitable retort, Rhodan made an announcement. Over his micro-transceiver, Endicott had reported the arrival of the fleet task force in the Outside System.

It soon became evident that the Laurins had stationed 6 ships on Surprise. As soon as they detected the approach of the Terran warships, the Invisibles took off immediately with their small force.

The battle over the small planet was furious but brief. One heavy cruiser of the Solar Fleet and 4 Laurin ships were destroyed. The other enemy vessels took to flight.

During the battle, Rhodan had been in constant contact with the fleet commanders. When the first spherical ship of Arkon steel lowered to the surface, the landscape was in complete darkness. The sun had set and the heat was dwindling rapidly.

Capt. Anthony Sands was the first man to be greeted by Rhodan.

“It seems we arrived here just at the right moment, sir,” he said.

“You might say so, yes,” agreed Rhodan.

He entered the looming space sphere at the head of his men. In this moment the Solar Imperium had Surprise firmly in hand.

A THEORY OF EVIL

Eight days had passed. At their own calm pace, Terran and Akon specialists had made an investigation of the underground installations. Van Moders headed the tour of research, having allowed himself only two days of rest.

When Rhodan came out of the *MONTANA*'s airlock for a last look around, he was met by the robotics expert and two other men. It was daytime but Outside had already passed the zenith.

"Well, everything's behind us except for a few routine items," Van Moders told him by way of greeting. "All in all, we should consider ourselves lucky, sir. Our off-course jump thru the transmitter has brought us farther than we dared to hope. I doubt that we would have learned any more on a Posbi space station."

"What have you found out?" inquired Rhodan. "Dr. Bryant has already given me a general picture."

Van Moders' squarish face reflected his vexation at having somebody beat him to the preliminaries. "We are now completely certain that these subterranean installations were built by the natives of Mechanica," he began.

Rhodan waved a hand impatiently. "Our primary interest is the unfinished robots on the conveyor belts, due to their similarity to the Posbis."

Van Moders smiled. "They are Posbis," he explained. "There's no doubt about that. They were built by the Mechanica people for the purpose of self-defense. What we have here is weapon robots which were close to being completed."

"So what do you deduce from that?"

"A great deal, sir. The main thing is that we might say with certainty that the Mechanica beings created the prototype of the present-day Posbis who have given us so much trouble."

"And the plasma? Was it also supplied by Mechanica?"

While they slowly approached the light cruiser's airlock, Van Moders made a gesture of despair. "That's been the subject of some heated discussions between myself and my colleagues," he said. "But one thing should be

beyond contradiction now. The Posbis were originally normal robots who were turned in the wrong direction by the addition of their plasma brains.”

“Don’t dodge the question,” Rhodan persisted. “I’m asking you – who were the ones who subsequently added the plasma to the robots?”

“It wasn’t the cybernetic scientists of Mechanica in any case,” Van Moders assured him. Rhodan had to wait for him to continue. “Kule-Tats has come up with the theory that it could be the Laurins who inserted the plasma into the Posbis.”

Rhodan knew the Ara scientist as being a very conservative realist. It was astonishing that the Ara could make such an assumption. It was more the type of thinking that fitted Van Moders.

“That sounds a bit illogical,” he said, “considering what bitter enemies the Laurins and Posbis are – and even Kule-Tats knows that. Why should the Laurins create biopositronic robots that they’re only going to have to fight?”

“I share your view, sir,” replied Van Moders in a strange undertone.

Rhodan looked at him intently. They reached the airlock and entered the *MONTANA*. “You have something else,” Rhodan told him. “You’ve followed up the Ara’s theory to see if there could be any validity to it.”

Van Moders nodded. “All right,” he confessed. “I worked with Fyrn and did some investigating on my own. The scientists of the Supreme Council of Akon have run some probability curves against our postulations.”

Rhodan came to a halt. Behind his viewplate, Van Moders’ pugnacious countenance seemed to be more surly than usual. “And you’ve already received the results?”

“Yes. Very brief, sir, but nonetheless astonishing. Originally the Posbis were harmless. The Laurins must have provided them later with individual plasma brains. All available data lead to the conclusion that it could only have been the Laurins.” Van Moders swallowed hard. “The evaluation analysis gives a 100% certainty of it, sir.”

The Laurins! Rhodan shook his head. What was the relationship between the Posbis and the Invisibles? How was it possible that the Posbis always attacked the Laurins so furiously whenever they appeared?

Van Moders seemed to have guessed his unspoken question. “We still haven’t any specifics, sir, but presumably the Laurins have made some terrible error. Apparently their original intent with the Posbis was something else.”

“One might assume that,” agreed Rhodan. “But we probably won’t ever find out what that original purpose was. Was it constructive or destructive? Much depends on that. It’s most likely that the Laurins planned to use the Posbis for destructive purposes.”

“It’s as if they invoked the wrong genie,” commented Van Moders cryptically.

Rhodan took off his helmet and began to remove his heavy spacesuit. Van Moders and the two scientists followed his example.

Then Rhodan snapped his fingers suddenly. “That would explain the Laurins’ frenzied efforts to *bind* the evil genie they’ve unleashed!”

“The whole thing is uncanny,” admitted the robotics expert. “I can’t avoid the feeling, sir, that if we dig deeper into this we’ll be in for some still more unpleasant surprises. Somewhere there’s a gap I can’t quite close.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The plasma, sir! It’s still a riddle. The Laurins only furnished it – it’s the Posbis themselves who changed it . . .”

Rhodan grasped Van Moders’ arm. “Out with it now,” he demanded. “You have another theory but haven’t wanted to express it.”

Van Moders’ face was grave. He pulled away and leaned back against a storage shelf. “There’s an old *Fantasy* tale,” he said. “It’s about the soul of an evil man who wanders helplessly thru time and space. As a soul he is completely harmless. However, thru the stupidity of somebody he acquires a new body, which means he is then able to perpetrate all sorts of evil deeds.”

“I don’t believe in the transmigration of souls,” remarked Rhodan with a faint smile.

“Neither do I,” said Van Moders gloomily. “But I can believe in the ignorance or stupidity that can lead to a catastrophic mistake.”

Rhodan looked at him closely. “And you wouldn’t ever be capable of making such a mistake?”

Van Moders shook his head silently. After a moment he spoke as if to himself. “Not the kind of error we’re talking about, sir. The human mentality would not be capable of it.”

*

Reginald Bell sighed with relief when he eased himself down on the seat

cushion that Keechie had shoved over to him. Sitting beside him, Perry Rhodan smiled at Fyrn who occupied the third cushion at the table.

“Our chubby friend always needs a little time to get into a comfortable position,” he explained.

Bell gave Perry a furious look. He half raised up only to sink back again suddenly. The cushion was squashed to less than half its size. “Ah!” he sighed pleasurably. It was a sure sign that he was now feeling comfortable. “Let’s have at it!”

“Now you’re not going to get carried away, are you?” cautioned Rhodan.

Bell raised a brow at him irritably. “Who, me? I was just thinking we’d celebrate the return of the prodigal son. By the way, Fyrn I have arranged a billet for you on board the *F-49*. If you think you’d like that, you can take off with that research ship in three days.”

“What did Berhaan have to say?” asked the Akon.

“Not much,” answered Rhodan evasively.

“Well,” said Bell, “then start in telling me what happened. Outside dried you out so much that your nose looks yellow.”

He laughed and leaned forward as he talked. The cushion let out a groan as if a horse were sitting on it. Keechie glided up to them and took their orders.

Rhodan waited until the Nevranian had disappeared before he spoke. “There’s work to do, Chubby.”

Bell put his hands to his head in mock despair. “You no sooner get back to Earth than the whip starts cracking!” he complained. “So it’s work, is it?”

Rhodan was not to be diverted. “You know the results of the research on Surprise. Although the situation appears to be still more puzzling now, we have perceived the source of the danger that the Solar Imperium – in fact the entire galaxy – is exposed to.”

“The danger is no bigger than it was before,” grumbled Bell.

“True, but now we can see it in its full proportions, Bell. The Laurins and the Posbis are still occupied with each other, but sooner or later one of them will be the victor. What happens then? Isn’t it more than likely that the victor will move against us?”

Bell looked imploringly at Fyrn for support, but the Akon was studying the wall decorations as if at the moment this was the most important work at hand.

Rhodan continued. “Van Moders told me about a *Fantasy* tale. It was about

a soul that wanders about thru eternity in disembodied form until it obtains a body, which enables it to continue its works of evil.” He rubbed his chin reflectively. “He didn’t tell me much more, but I think our robot specialist is on the trail of something quite fantastic.”

Keechie arrived and brought three glasses. He bowed slightly as he spoke in his gentle voice. “Well, my Mr. Bell I told you before that nothing is lost that continues to live in our thoughts. And there you have your Mr. Administrator again.”

The Nevranian set down the drinks. The polished glasses seemed to be reflected in his four eyes. Keechie looked incredibly old and wise, and perhaps he was. They waited until he had walked away on his furry, clawed feet. Muted music was playing somewhere in the background.

Rhodan lifted his glass. “What should we drink to?” he asked.

“To our return,” suggested Fyrn.

“No,” countered Bell. “Let’s drink to what Keechie told us. Somehow it goes with Van Moders’ restless soul in that fairytale.” He raised his glass to the others. “A toast, friends! Let nothing be lost that continues to live in our thoughts!”

“Even in a million years,” added Fyrn.

Somewhere in the background of the room stood Keechie. There was a gleam in his wise old eyes, which seemed to reflect the vast distances that separated him from his home world.

THE END

In the face of the Posbi threat the arrogant Akons, progenitors of the Arkonides, have agreed to enter into an alliance with Arkon and Terra. And in the final analysis the special mission we have just depicted was only made possible with the help of Akon technology.

However, Perry Rhodan believes that the Akons should not be trusted and he acts accordingly. With the help of the para-tuner, Ernst Ellert, he manages to steal the most effective weapon of the Posbis.

*You will learn more about it in the next Perry Rhodan adventure, **DEADMEN SHOULDN’T DIE**, written by Clark Darlton.*